THE CROW

BY

JEANETTE BARCROFT

BASED ON THE FILM
STARRING
BRANDON LEE

PRODUCED BY
JEFF MOST

DIRECTED BY
ALEX PROYAS

SCREENPLAY BY
DAVID J. SCHOW
AND
JOHN SHIRLEY

BASED ON
THE COMIC BOOK SERIES AND COMIC STRIP
BY
JAMES O'BARR

DEDICATED
TO
BRANDON LEE
(1965 - 1993)

Dreamdancer (Brandon's Song)

I sit bemused

And drenched in dreams,

Wrapt in silence,

While within

Myriad voices sing,

Myriad shadows dance.

This is my song:

To build a shadow world

Of joy and pain and joy again;

Where all is deeper, wider, brighter, darker,

Dream incarnate - wholly, purely, singing

... singing;

Where lost things come to rest,

And the unborn unfolds its wings and flies.

— Jeanette Barcroft

Author's Note

This novelisation of the movie, The Crow, has not been authorised by anyone connected with the making of the movie. I wrote it solely for my own pleasure — a true labour of love. I now wish to share it with those who also share my admiration of Brandon Lee and his performance in James O'Barr's moving tale of grief and revenge. It is my gift to all of you, and my memorial to him. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Jeanette Barcroft
JLBarcroft@aol.com
12 December 1998

Elegy For Brandon

I... I never knew him,

But another I,

In the dancing shadows,

Danced with him.

But where is the Dance

Which shifts the great Immovable,

Beyond which he has gone?

O foolish bird at the heart of me,

To beat my wings

Against that transparent barrier:

To see so clearly

Him who can never be reached.

... And so I come to death

And grief of death at last

This roundabout way.

— Jeanette Barcroft

Whenever someone dies, a ripple is felt throughout all the elemental planes, and a great, compassionate spirit reaches into this world. It is many... and it is one. It is everywhere... and it is here. It has a thousand souls to guide... and just this one, lost and bewildered in an unknown darkness.

A winged shadow, in the mortal shape of an earth-born bird, takes flight over a sunless and suffering city. Beneath its glistening wings great fires reach up with greedy flame fingers, but it flies on in unperturbed passage through the rain-wet sky, and in a voiceless whisper calls:

[Come. Follow me. It is time.]

Betrayal

People once believed that when someone dies, a crow carries their soul to the land of the dead. But sometimes, something so bad happens that a terrible sadness is carried with it; and the soul can't rest. Then sometimes, just sometimes, the crow can bring that soul back — to put the wrong things right.

— Sarah's Journal

October 30, Devil's Night.

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
>
> **— William Butler Yeats**

Sergeant Albrecht looked through the shattered remnants of the once-handsome round window that dominated the high loft where he stood, drawing sombrely on his ever-present cigarette. But he wasn't paying attention to the opening that gaped at his feet and arched over his head, or even to the fevered activity of the police investigation in full spate behind him. For the moment he was looking down six stories at the blood-drenched body of a young man lying broken on the sidewalk below, and he felt a grief that years on the force hadn't burned out of him — another innocent victim of the senseless violence that poisoned this city, another bright future lost, another dream destroyed.

Then, as the body below was mercifully covered, hiding it from his sight, he crushed his cigarette underfoot and turned his attention back to the room behind him. It had been a nice place once... just a little while ago. And even now, trashed and vandalised, it was still an appealing room, with its heavy cast

iron support pipes angling sharply towards the high ceiling, subdividing the space into airy pyramids topped with Victorian fretwork. When the round window had been intact — eight feet in diameter with its surrounding lunettes — it must have been an imposing space.

Now it was a shambles, a charnel house, a place of death and suffering.

Albrecht looked grimly at the paramedics, urgent and intent as they worked on a young woman. Scattered across the floor were photographs of a pretty, laughing face that bore no resemblance to the bloodstained anguish that he could see behind the oxygen mask strapped over her mouth and nose; and the pitiful, almost animal noises that she made were as far removed from laughter as any human utterance could be.

> Young man I think I know you — I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,
> Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.
>
> **— Walt Whitman**

Posted on the wall in places of honour were a series of publicity photos: a band — Hangman's Joke — five young men alternately grinning and glowering theatrically into the camera. He'd heard of them before — local boys making good. One of them he'd seen before... until a bloodied sheet had been drawn over him. It had been a handsome face, with a shoulder-length mane of dark hair, high cheekbones, a strong jaw that gave his frown a pugnacious look, and a smile whose sweetness belied the truculence of that jaw. Albrecht scanned the pictures on the wall with a leaden eye — there had been no laughter left on that silent face, only a stunned bewilderment... and oblivion.

From the litter on the floor he picked up a delicately engraved wedding invitation and read it with a growing sense of resignation: "Shelly Webster and Eric Draven cordially invite you to participate in their sunset wedding, 31 October..." *It only needed this*, he thought sadly, shaking his head.

"Hey, Sarge." Albrecht looked up from the invitation and saw the wedding dress resplendent on a dressmaker's dummy, and he nodded to the curious officer standing next to it.

"Yeah," he said heavily, walking over to touch the exquisite lace. "Shelly Webster and Eric Draven. Wedding was tomorrow night."

"Who the fuck gets married on Halloween anyhow?" the other asked, hiding his emotions under an air of breezy disgust, but he didn't fool Albrecht.

"Nobody," he said flatly. *Not in* this *life anyway*. Then the strained voice of one of the paramedics distracted him.

"Sir? We *gotta* move her." He looked over at Albrecht in desperate appeal, while Shelly Webster moaned and writhed before him.

"Do it!" Albrecht said, his own voice tight.

"Right, guys. Do it!" the paramedic said with relief, gathering their gear and beginning the long difficult passage down five flights of stairs — the old building didn't boast anything so modern as an elevator.

"Devil's fuckin' Night!" the other officer grunted, looking out the window at a fire raging just across the street. "What's the count so far?" But his casual words couldn't hide the fear in his voice.

"A hundred and forty-three fires," Albrecht answered grimly, but that count was already a half an hour old. Who knew what it was by now.

"They're slackin' off from last year," the other said, almost hopefully.

"Three hours to go... maybe they're just slow starters," Albrecht said sourly. He had the feeling that *this* year was going to be the worst yet. Then with a grimace of pained compassion on his dark brown face, he gazed at the shattered room and thought about the shattered lives it spoke of — the broken window, the bloodied bed, and the great drying pool of blood in the middle of the floor.

And everywhere, the investigators were gathering evidence — taking photographs, dusting for prints. Oh, they'd find plenty of evidence all right, for all the good it would do them. Nothing would ever come of it, he knew. Nothing ever did. Evidence would get "lost", witnesses would "forget". Even if they made a few arrests, there wouldn't be any convictions — the "fix was in" and he'd already beaten his head against its brick wall enough to know the futility of even trying.

He sighed and went to follow Shelly Webster on what was probably going to be her final journey anywhere.

> The timidity of the child... is entirely reasonable; they are alarmed at this world, because this world is a very alarming place. They dislike being alone because it is verily and indeed an awful idea to be alone.
>
> **— G. K. Chesterton**

Sarah had meant to stay home that night, she really had. After all, the wedding was tomorrow night and Shelly and Eric would want to be alone; and besides, she wasn't a little kid any more, to be scared of Devil's Night: for every one of her ten years, she'd survived it just fine.

She would've been okay, even though Darla hadn't come home yet — so, what else was new? — but the building across the street caught on fire with a roar that shook everything for a block around, and suddenly she lost her nerve.

After all, it is *Devil's Night and they* did *ask me to stay with them,* Sarah told herself as she grabbed her skateboard and hurried downstairs into the street. She just hoped they wouldn't give her a bad time about chickening out... nah, they wouldn't do that, they were too cool to tease about something like being a little jumpy on Devil's Night.

They'd take her in just like they always did when she needed a place to stay, like when Darla left her alone for too long, or worse yet, when she brought someone home. They would laugh and kid around, and maybe Eric would play the guitar and sing for them. And she wouldn't be scared, not with them, even on Devil's Night... even if there was a fire. Eric would take care of them if there was trouble, Eric always took care of them.

But when she turned onto the street where Shelly lived and saw all the flashing lights and the burning building, she knew a moment of fear that cut like a knife of ice through her stomach. *No, no, you dummy. It's across the street*, she chided herself, checking out Shelly's building just to be sure. It was fine, no fire anywhere in it, just a lot of people looking out of windows

at all the activity in the street. Then she froze all over again.

There was something wrong with the window in Shelly's room! The big round window that they all loved — it looked like it was broken! No, no, it had to be her imagination, it was too high to really tell anyway. But as she got closer, she could see the lights and the figures moving around inside the loft that should have held only Shelly and Eric.

Skating as fast as she could, Sarah sped up to the edges of the crowd and began elbowing her way rudely past the restless, unheeding bodies barring her way. But there was something wrong, she could tell. They weren't out here just to see the fire, people didn't act this jumpy and morbidly curious for a fire... not on Devil's Night. She could hear an angry voice by the entranceway to the building.

"... I realise that, but you can't come in here and move her away like this. We got procedures to stick by. You guys shoulda cleared this with me first. This the victim?" The *victim?* Sarah thought in a rising panic, what *victim* did he mean? No, no, it couldn't be...

"No, it's Amelia Earhart. We found her, detective, and you missed it." That was another voice, tired and sarcastic, but kind too, even though she could tell he was annoyed by the angry man. But who were they talking about? Desperately Sarah wriggled her way through the crowd, then stopped in shock when she caught sight of a blood-drenched sheet covering... *something*! What? Who? No, no... From beyond another group of curious on-lookers, the angry voice barked out again.

"I don't care what her *name* is, I didn't give the order to move her. Jesus, Albrecht, I can see why they took away your gold shield."

"Yeah, I wasn't a big enough ass-hole. C'mon, let's go," the kind voice said impatiently, heading towards her, and the crowd parted to reveal a gurney being pushed by a paramedic, with a kind-faced black policeman walking protectively next to it. And on the gurney...

"Shelly?" Sarah gasped in disbelief, horror slamming into her like a fist. She felt sick when she saw all the blood, all the tubes. And who was under that sheet? No, no, it couldn't be Eric!

"Stand back, kid," the cop said with brusque compassion, but Sarah grabbed the gurney railing and refused to be brushed away.

> A simple Child,
> That lightly draws its breath,
> And feels its life in every limb,
> What should it know of death?
>
> **— William Wordsworth**

With a convulsive effort, Shelly dragged the oxygen mask from her face and looked fearfully up at them, her voice hoarse and breathless as she begged, "Where's Eric?"

Under that sheet, Sarah thought tearfully, wanting to throw up at the thought... and at the sight of Shelly, her face all broken and swollen and bloody, twisted with pain and a terrible fear.

"Just don't worry about him," the cop said gently, trying to reassure her, but Sarah knew he was just making meaningless noises to keep her quiet.

"Tell him to take care of Sarah," Shelly whispered, sobbing in agony, as the last of her strength faded away. And Sarah could only stand stricken, paralysed by the suddenness of it all, while she watched the woman who was more mother to her than her real mother being lifted into the waiting ambulance.

"Look, I will," the cop was saying, in the kind of voice grown-ups used when they were shining you on. "You just... uh, lie back. C'mon, c'mon," he called to the paramedics, hurrying them along.

They closed the doors to the ambulance and stood despondently, watching it drive away, siren wailing like a lost soul; and Sarah finally realised that something much worse than a fire had come into her life that night: that everything... the *only* things... she loved had been stolen from her.

"You Sarah?"

"Yeah," she whispered, still staring after the ambulance. Then she looked up at the policeman, and her tears turned his worried face into a dark blur.

"Yeah, look. Your sister... she's gonna be okay," he said, in that same "shining-it-on" voice and Sarah couldn't stand it anymore.

"She's not my sister," she said bleakly, her throat so tight that she could hardly get the words out. "Shelly just takes care of me. She's my friend, her and Eric." *My best friends*, she thought, *my* only *friends*. "You lied to her about Eric..." she added, remembering that sheet-draped body, not accusing him, but just stating a fact. A fact she was having a hard time admitting to herself — Eric was dead! And even then, she hoped he'd contradict her. But he didn't.

"Look, I had to," he admitted, finally being honest with her... and destroying the last of her hope.

"And you're lying to me about Shelly," she went on, shaking with the pain of her loss. "She's gonna die, isn't she?" She dragged her sleeve across her face, no longer able to speak around the ache in her throat that hurt like she'd swallowed a razor blade, or to hold back the tears that burned her eyes like acid.

"Hey... uh. Now, come on, come on," the cop groaned, unmanned by her grief. "S'okay, she's gonna be fine," he soothed, patting her shoulder. He was bullshitting her again, but this time she was ready to accept the comfort he was trying to give her. And the pressure of his warm hands on her shoulders was the only thing that kept her on her feet, as she gave way to an overwhelming sorrow.

They were gone — one minute everything was okay, and the next... nothing would ever be okay again. She was all alone, like she'd been most of her life... and it was more than she could bear.

Unnoticed over their heads, a crow sat with funereal calm and looked upon the scene below. Voiceless, it called... and voiceless, it was answered:

[Come. It is time to leave this place.]

No. Shelly! Shelly! I can't leave. I have to protect Shelly. I have to get to her! I can't leave. I can't leave.

Sergeant Albrecht was starting to feel the drag of twenty-four hours without sleep, and he knew that his ordeal had just begun. For the last eight hours he'd sat by the bedside of the wreck of what had once been a vibrant, lovely, young bride-to-be. He'd watched the doctors come, marshalling all the forces of twentieth-century medicine before them... and leave, shaking their heads wearily, defeated by the havoc wreaked by that most primitive of weapons — the human hand.

Shelly Webster was dying. Not easily and — God help her — not quickly. And like some kind of vulture, he stayed by her side, praying that she would revive just long enough to give him a name. Just one little name so he could get the scumbags who'd done this to her and make them *pay*. But so far she hadn't said a word after that one heartbreakingly useless request in the street: *Tell Eric to take care of Sarah*. Eric couldn't even take care of himself now... neither of them would ever take care of anyone again. And what of little Sarah? Just another wounded soul in a city full of them.

He didn't know why this one turned his stomach so much. He'd been a cop too long, he'd been in this neighbourhood too long, for something like this to bother him. Maybe it was because they were supposed to have been married today. Maybe it was because he'd heard her boyfriend's music before and liked it. Maybe it was because he'd seen them together in the neighbourhood, alive and full of joy. Maybe it was because that kid, Sarah, had cried so hopelessly in his arms.

Whatever it was, it made him feel like hell.

But he didn't really need Shelly's testimony to know who was responsible for what had happened that night — it was Top Dollar. That evil man was behind *everything* that went on in this neighbourhood. He was the centre and source of the cancer that blighted the district, and he ran it like a spider — a particularly poisonous spider — sitting in the middle of its web, in some mysterious way sensitive to every quiver of every thread, always making the pre-emptive strike, never caught unawares. Top Dollar had everybody's number: He knew who was honest and who wasn't, and who was hypocrite enough to be

corrupted. He knew who was weak and who was strong, and he knew all the ways that the strong ones could be weakened. He knew who the movers and shakers were in the city, and he knew who could be moved and who could be shaken to his advantage. And he used everything he knew to maintain his stranglehold on the city.

The soldiers he'd sent after Shelly Webster and Eric Draven were irrelevant, they were merely puppets under orders — vicious, murdering puppets — but they were "under the dragon's wing", as the saying went in the neighbourhood.

Shit, even if he had twenty witnesses and a videotape, Albrecht doubted there'd be any convictions, and Top Dollar would still be untouched. He didn't know why he even bothered to keep this vigil — Shelly Webster was never going to awaken this side of Heaven, and even if she did, and gave him names and detailed descriptions, it would do no good. But he stayed anyway. Nobody should have to die alone.

Especially a bride on her wedding day.

> O fairest of creation! last and best
> Of all God's works! creature in whom excell'd
> Whatever can to sight or thought be form'd,
> Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet!
> How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
> Defac'd, deflower'd, and now to Death devote?
>
> **— John Milton**

The old graveyard by the abandoned cathedral was a depressing place to be on a wet November afternoon, but Sergeant Albrecht felt irresistibly drawn to it. Morosely he stood in the mud before two newly-erected gravestones and stared at the flowers withering around them.

Shelly Webster and Eric Draven, together in death as they no longer could be in life. Damn it! Why couldn't he let this one go? Gloomily he walked out of the graveyard, lost in dark thoughts.

The case was going nowhere — as usual. The detectives were stalled — as usual. Nobody was talking — as usual. And his superiors were getting pissed off — as usual! But Albrecht couldn't let go — Shelly Webster haunted him. The file told him nothing. The evidence that had been gathered was useless. Maybe something had been overlooked. He headed back to the old Calderon Court building where Eric Draven had died, and as he drove deeper into that neighbourhood, the city grew darker. Even at midday in full summer, light seemed to fail in this part of town — here the rain seemed wetter, the air held more chill. People who lived in this neighbourhood liked to say "This isn't Hell, but you can see it from here." But it was *his* neighbourhood — he'd grown up here, he lived here, he worked here, its darkness was a part of him, and he tried to create his own light where he needed it.

Like now, for instance.

Climbing the five flights of stairs in the hushed apartment building left him panting and irritated. Already a good third of the tenants had moved out — rats deserting the sinking ship... or maybe just prudent people heeding the writing on the wall. But he forgot all that when he faced the yellow plastic tape stretched across Shelly Webster's Halloween-decorated door and broke the flimsy police seal.

Almost furtively he pushed it open and ducked under the tape into the spacious loft, still unchanged from the way he'd seen it a week before. Oh, the blood had dried by now, and the rain had soaked the floor around the broken window, and the wind had drifted most of the loose stuff up against the walls. But nothing was missing that he could see, nothing had been touched.

And yet... there was a *presence* in that room that set the hairs prickling along the back of his neck. All his cop's instincts told him he wasn't alone, that there was someone or some*thing* in here with him, something tortured and desperate.

The search he made for overlooked evidence was as fruitless as he'd feared it would be, but he didn't skimp any of it, even when the fatigue of a week of double shifts began creeping up on him. Not even when that damned *presence* had him jumping at every

floorboard creak and wind rustle. Finally he gave up in bitter frustration.

Wearily he closed the door to the loft, with all its disturbing images and began making his way down the stairs. Then he came to a sudden halt, his hand going to his gun as he again sensed that same *presence* he'd felt in the loft, only now it was coming up the stairs towards him. But his gun pointed at nothing but empty air as something cold drifted urgently past him.

Quickly he turned, straining to see up the dim stairwell, and for just a moment he thought he glimpsed a leather-jacketed figure with long dark hair rush to the door of the loft. And in the clutter of noise in the old building he thought he heard a frightened voice cry out: "Shelly!" Then there was nothing, and he was alone on the stairwell again.

God, he had to get some sleep; he was starting to hallucinate! Only... somehow he had the eerie feeling that what he'd seen was no hallucination, that in some unearthly way Eric Draven was still trying to reach his Shelly... and that he was doomed to failure for all eternity.

> Though lovers be lost, love shall not;
> And death shall have no dominion.
>
> **— Dylan Thomas**

Judgement

A building gets torched, all that is left is ashes. I used to think that was true about everything — families, friends, feelings. But now I know that sometimes, if love proves real, two people who are meant to be together... nothing can keep them apart.

— Sarah's journal.

One year later.

> Sorrow... is utterly useless to any one; a blight never does good to a tree, & if a blight kill not a tree but it still bear fruit, let none say that the fruit was in consequence of the blight.
>
> **— William Blake**

Briskly Sarah skate-boarded her way through the chilly, storm-threatened streets towards the old abandoned cathedral. In the fading daylight, its magnificent proportions and soaring spires still had the power to awe... until you saw the ragged holes in the leaded roof and the broken panels in the stained glass windows — too expensive for the parish to repair, and the parish too poor for the mother church to bother. It was almost as if

God had abandoned the still beautiful building to its fate... as He had done to the rest of the neighbourhood.

Since the cathedral had "died", it was only appropriate that the cemetery was still very much "alive" — people were still being buried in it, and those left behind still came and left what mementoes they could afford. Sarah couldn't afford anything, but she thought it was only fair that everybody should share... after all, wasn't death supposed to be the "great leveller"?

So she went from grave to grave, taking a single flower from each one that had an offering on it. In the summertime she'd raid the alley behind the florist's for flowers, but this time of year it got dark too soon to do that and make it back to the cemetery while she could still see. It was important that she see what she was doing, even though she'd done it so many times in the last year that she'd memorised every step of the way.

Finally she arrived at two simple graves set side by side in a quiet corner of the graveyard. An old tree stretched its branches protectively over them, and just a few weeks earlier had covered them with a soft shroud of fallen leaves. Carefully Sarah propped her stolen bouquet against the stone that read "Shelly Webster", and placed one perfect white rose, also stolen, on the litter of leaves over the grave marked "Eric Draven".

Straightening up, she looked pensively at the two peaceful graves. For the longest time she hadn't been able to come here without crying her eyes out; but sometime, after the spring flowers had blossomed and faded, and the old tree had managed to put out another crop of green leaves, it had gotten easier... not *easy*, mind you, but easier.

Now she could look at them and remember the good times with Eric and Shelly, the fun they used to have and the hopes they'd had for the future, and it almost didn't hurt at all.

"Later," she promised them, knowing that "almost" wasn't going to cut it — that it still hurt just as much as it ever had. The pain hadn't gotten any less — she'd just gotten stronger.

But not strong enough... never strong enough.

And it was starting to rain again, as if she wasn't already depressed. Resignedly she dragged the hood of her jacket over

her head and started to turn away from her friends' final resting place.

Then she stiffened as an enormous crow flew down from the direction of the cathedral and landed on Eric's stone just a couple of yards away from where she was standing. It cocked its head curiously at her and cawed a loud greeting. That was really weird — for a wild bird to come so close, and to look at her like it practically *knew* her.

"What're you, like, the night watchman?" she asked, half seriously, and jumped a little when the big bird almost seemed to answer her with a loud caw. It was a little creepy to see that big black bird perched so boldly on Eric's stone, but after the first couple of seconds, she didn't mind; it was even a little comforting to think that there was another living creature to keep them company... for a little while at least.

But she couldn't stay... not that there was anything waiting for her at home, probably not even enough food for dinner. She just didn't like hanging around here after dark — too many dead people. So, giving the crow a last quizzical look, she walked away through the rain. Behind her, she thought she heard the bird pecking at something, but when she looked back, it was just staring down at the rose she'd left for Eric. *Don't eat it*, she thought wryly, but crows were meat-eaters weren't they? It wouldn't bother with a flower.

She remembered a poem Shelly had read to her once... Shelly had loved poetry:

> "... By these angels he hath sent thee
> Respite — respite and nepenthe from thy memories...
> Is there — *is* there balm in Gilead? — tell me — tell me
> I implore!"
>
> Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

Shelly'd had to tell her what half those words meant, which was why she'd remembered it after all this time — pretty gloomy stuff, but it fit the way she felt. There *wasn't* any forgetfulness, and the sadness *didn't* let up.

With a sigh she set her skateboard down on the rain-slick street and pushed off, avoiding the sparse traffic with an ease born of long experience. If she hurried, she could get to Mickey's while Albrecht was still there — it was hard to be gloomy around them.

But still, she couldn't help thinking — tomorrow would be the first anniversary of Eric and Shelly's deaths. A whole year without music, without laughter, without love... it felt like it had been a lifetime.

Child, you are like a flower,
So sweet and pure and fair.
I look at you, and sadness
Touches me with a prayer.

— Heinrich Heine

An open-air hotdog stand wasn't much of a place to eat, but it was cheap and Officer Albrecht could keep an eye on his patrol car — which was a good idea in this neighbourhood — and besides, Mickey was a pal... even if he didn't know the right way to put together a 'dog.

"Y'know," the counterman drawled morosely as he squirted ketchup on Albrecht's hotdog, "what this place needs is a good natural catastrophe: earthquake, tornado... y'know."

"No, no, no, Mickey, c'mon man," Albrecht protested, deliberately giving his friend a bad time, "You gotta put the mustard underneath first." But Mickey ignored him, thinking through his own solutions for cleansing the neighbourhood.

"... maybe a flood like in the Bible," he went on thoughtfully. He was probably right at that, but you needed God for a biblical flood, and Albrecht had an idea God didn't care much what went on down here anymore. And why wish for natural catastrophes when Devil's Night tomorrow would bring more *un*natural ones than they could handle.

"Eh, eh, lemme do it. There we go," he said, taking the hotdog and anointing it the way he liked. Ah, forget fire and flood — think about dinner instead. "How about some onions?" he prompted, then snorted indignantly, "C'mon, don't cheap out on me... *lots* of onions. Now we're talkin'," and he grinned with satisfaction when Mickey heaped on extra onions.

It was a game they played all the time — Mickey preaching doom and gloom, and Albrecht acting like food was the only thing he was interested in. It filled the time, and brightened the

darkness a little, which was all you could hope for in this neighbourhood.

Then both their moods lifted when they heard the familiar sound of an approaching skateboard. There were, after all, a *few* other points of light in the 'hood.

"Hey, it's the Sarah monster," Mickey called out fondly as the little girl rolled to a practised stop and joined Albrecht at the counter. She looked like a little wet mouse, and he had a pretty good idea where she'd been — paying her respects to Shelly and Eric again. Albrecht knew the kind of home life she had that kept her wandering the streets, so he didn't say anything about her appearance, or the fact that she was alone out here on the "mean streets". He'd tried to pick up the slack a little after the death of her friends, but there was only so much he could do. The important thing was to be her friend — a kid like her needed all the friends she could get.

"How do you steer that thing on a wet street?" he asked admiringly, smiling at the collection of dime-store jewellery that she loved to wear — he had to admit it gave her a rather endearing air.

"Pure talent!" she said with the smugness of a master athlete... of course, she never went anywhere except on the skateboard, so practice probably had a lot more to do with it than talent, but what the hell. Then she grinned at both of them — a happy relaxed grin — probably glad to be among *living* friends again.

"Hi!" she said with a sigh, settling into place on the stool next to him.

"See now, Sarah... she's a genuine hot-dogger," Albrecht punned, proud of her strength and resilience — she'd had some really tough breaks in the last year, but she had what it took to make it through okay. Except, maybe, enough food to eat. "You hungry?" he asked, not making a big deal out of it.

"You buyin'?" she teased, almost flirtatiously. Flirting? God, they grew up fast in this neighbourhood... or was it just that girls were *born* knowing how to flirt?

"I'm buying," he reassured her, trying not to laugh — she could be so damned funny for an eleven-year-old.

"No onions though, okay," she said, and he could tell by her tone of voice that she was setting him up for something. Well, he was glad to play straight man for her.

"No *onions?*" he said, in an affronted tone, obligingly walking right into whatever it was.

"They make you fart *big* time," she said smugly, giving them a satisfied little smile when they cracked up.

It was nice to joke and laugh with good friends and (pretty) good food, Sarah thought. She just wished there was more of that kind of thing in her life... like there'd been when Shelly and Eric were still alive. But for now, laughter — what little there was — was the only balm in Gilead, and a hotdog with friends was the closest she was ever likely to come to respite and nepenthe.

Arcade Games was dark and quiet, with only a soft whimpering, as from some small wounded animal, to break the silence. Then a man's careless voice grated through the gloom.

"You know, Lake Erie actually caught on fire once, from all the crap floatin' around in it." He was a man about forty with a ritually scarred face — three vertical marks on his forehead and a circular cigar burn on each cheek, just above the scraggly short beard he affected — and cold, hooded eyes. In the shadowy interior of the arcade, the flame from his Zippo as he lit a cigar was almost the only light.

For a dreaming moment he contemplated the image of a lake in flames. "Ah! I wish I coulda seen that!" Then he snapped himself back to the present and gave a sharp drill-sergeant whistle.

"Yee-haaaa!" the cry echoed through the arcade as his three scruffy companions began demolishing all the glass-fronted games in a frenzy of destruction that was almost sexual in its intensity. Of course, it was all business — the stupid bitch who ran the place should've known better than to cross Top Dollar. She did *now*, for all the good it did her.

They were getting paid well for this night's work, so he let the boys play — they liked to break things... and the bitch had been a nice little bonus. But the scar-faced man, known to all in the neighbourhood as T-bird, for the supercharged red Thunderbird he always drove, had other things on his agenda. Let the boys have their fun... *he* had work to do.

Expertly he keyed in the necessary sequence and smiled with grim satisfaction as the LED display began counting down: 5:00... 4:59... 4:58... With another whistle and a quick gesture he gathered his crew and they spilled out into the quiet street, riotous with excitement. Destruction always turned them on.

"Fire it up! Fire it up!" He led them in their victory chant — four wild-eyed men pumping their arms in the rain-wet night. And anyone unlucky enough to hear them shuddered in fear and stayed well out of their sight. Then they piled into the big Thunderbird and roared away into the darkness.

... 3:59... 3:58...

> Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?
>
> **— I Corinthians 15:54-55**

The crow perched quietly on Eric's gravestone looking down at the pale rosebud lying on the ground before it. A heavy, driving rain soaked the very air around it, but the bird merely blinked patiently into the shadowed night. It *was* patience, and it had been waiting for a long time.

Through the short dark days of the previous winter, it had waited. When spring brought a small measure of grace to the blighted streets, it had waited. And when summer came with sullen heat and acrid smog, it had waited. It had waited until the days shortened and the rains began to wash the filth away

again, until the cycles of sun and spinning earth marched them back to All Hallow's Eve... and Devil's night.

And now the waiting was at an end.

Suddenly the little rosebud shifted and rolled aside and the ground beneath it lifted and split apart. Solemnly the bird watched as the dirt fell away and the lid of Eric's coffin opened wide and... *something* reached out of it into the cold and the wet of the cruel night. No, not *something* — a hand, just a hand... a *human* hand. Not a skeleton or a zombie or freakish thing, dead a year and rotting in a grave — just a strong guitarist's hand, a *living* hand, attached to a living body, clawing at the crumbling earth as if he'd only just fallen into a muddy hole and was scrambling to climb out.

But there was something wrong with him. He crawled and struggled, flopping and writhing repulsively on the sodden ground like a fish out of water, groaning, then howling in anguish with a horrible bestial cry, while the rain ran in streams over his almost unrecognisable face.

Why was he in such pain?

Racked by agony, he staggered to his feet, as wet and ungainly as a new-born calf, wrapping his arms helplessly around a low-hanging tree limb, flinching in animal terror when the crow flew up to land beside him. He lifted his dazed, suffering face to the waiting bird, blinking in the cold rain.

Wisps of steam rose from his shivering skin, but there was an uncomprehending expression in his eyes. It was Eric... and it wasn't Eric — Eric without memory, without even humanity.

But it was better that he didn't remember, that he had no knowledge of himself. Remembering would be too cruel. This slack mindlessness was the kindest thing he could know, now that *something* had dragged... or driven... him from the Peace of his grave.

Clinging to the tree branch, he grew a little stronger, a little steadier, and the crow took flight, leading him into the night. Like an obedient but mindless dog on a leash, he stumbled in its wake, falling more than once when his clumsy feet betrayed him. Some harsh, primitive instinct drove him to follow the crow without thought or question, but the bird led him well — it had had an eternity of practice.

With awkward hands, Eric clawed off his open-backed burial shirt and coat as if they angered him, as if all the sorrow and grief of those who'd mourned him had steeped itself into the very fabric he wore... and scalded him with their caustic caress. He kept — without even knowing why — only the silk-thread friendship bracelet that he'd worn ever since Shelly had made it for him so long ago... in another lifetime for both of them. Then he staggered on, half-naked and barefoot, through the slime and filth of the alleys, still following the crow. On his rain-dewed and trembling flesh could be seen five ugly scars — like blobs of melted wax — from the wounds that had killed him: four bullet wounds in front (and four exit wounds in back), a wider one where a knife had pierced him, plus a dozen thin traces where the window had bitten him.

Do dead people scar?

Albrecht watched Sarah apply herself to getting outside of her (onionless) hotdog with a smile of satisfaction. Sure, it wasn't much of a meal, but at least she wouldn't go hungry tonight. After she finished he planned to offer her a lift back to her mom's apartment, and with any luck, she'd take him up on it. That would get her off the streets for one night at least. In a year of looking out for Sarah, he'd learned to take it one day, one meal, one ride home at a time. He knew she still mourned her friends, but more than that, she missed the focus they'd given her life. Albrecht knew he couldn't replace that any more than he could replace them, but he hoped he was at least a good substitute.

Only... shit, he couldn't even get his *own* life in order — how did he expect to be able to help a kid like Sarah? Oh well, he'd stick to hotdogs, and maybe someday, when she needed help, she'd turn to him instead of one of the cocky, gun-happy young bastards who crawled all over this neighbourhood... like that bunch driving towards them right now.

Not that T-Bird's crew were exactly *young*, but they were all first-class sons of bitches... and very high on his short list

of possible suspects in the Draven-Webster murders. T-Bird, Tin-tin, Funboy and Skank — four of the nastiest hounds kept in Top Dollar's kennels.

"Bad people out on the street tonight," he commented dryly, as T-Bird's big red muscle car — and source of his streetname — slowed down slightly in deference to the parked patrol car, then speeded off again into the night with a blare from its expensive sound system. Good thing he was going to drive Sarah home tonight — it was getting too close to Devil's Night for *anyone*, much less a little kid, to be out on the streets alone.

Sarah was enjoying her meal when suddenly everything in the little hotdog stand jumped in place and bounced with a clatter as they were shaken by the sound of an explosion no more than a block away. The humans all jumped too when they heard the sound that had become all too horribly familiar this time of year.

"Dammit," Albrecht muttered, dropping his cigarette and trying to sort out the source of the explosion from the sound of its echoes.

"What was that?" Sarah gasped, knowing only too well what it was, but scared anyway. It was a blast like that that had driven her out of the apartment last year, and that triggered all sorts of memories that she'd rather not deal with. Wide-eyed she turned to Albrecht, but he was already up, turning towards the ominous glow down the street.

"You wait right here," he cautioned worriedly — no ride home for her tonight — this was going to take hours.

"Be careful!" she cried, fear making her voice shake — she couldn't afford to lose another friend... cops lived such dangerous lives, particularly in *this* neighbourhood.

"Mickey, call it in for me," he shouted, running down the street towards the flames that he could see ahead of him, all thought of Sarah and her problems knocked out of his head by what he saw — it was going to be a bad one, he could tell. A passing car had been caught in the blast and he could hear panicked screams coming from surrounding buildings. More pain, more suffering, more innocent lives ripped apart.

Damn, *damn,* DAMN!

And their sun does never shine,
And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are filled with thorns:
It is eternal winter there.

— William Blake

Eric heard the explosion without comprehending what it was or what it meant. Dumbly he turned his head towards the source of the noise that hammered the air around him, flinching uselessly away from the painful impact. But the crow would not let him linger.

His arms were wrapped tightly around his bare and shivering torso, his hands fisted against his ribs; he careened drunkenly between the walls and bruised his feet against the unyielding debris as he staggered through the pitiless alleys. The cold cut at him like knives, and he shuddered at the abuse done to his bare feet. In suffering bewilderment he followed the crow without thought.

He heard the pitiful whimpering long before he saw the body huddled in a dark trash-strewn corner. Like a startled deer he stiffened as a flash of memory seared his mind — once before he had heard a woman cry out like that. Then the memory was lost in a wash of horror that dropped into emptiness.

[You are not here to help the living.]

The crow spread its wings before him, barring the way, but Eric couldn't understand the strange message in his head. And something beyond even its compulsion drew him. He followed the tiny sound around a corner into a flame-lit alley and shrank in primeval terror from the blaze that consumed the sky before him. He would have fled then, obeying the crow, but he saw the form of a woman lying torn and broken, swept like flotsam amidst the refuse of the alleyway. All unknowing he reached out to touch her...

She was counting the day's receipts when she heard the noise. Then they were all around her. She knew them — they had been on her case all this last month. But she was already paying them more than she could afford for "protection"... they said it wasn't enough. She thrust the money at them... but that wasn't enough either. And she saw her own doom in their eyes.

She tried to run away then, but Tin Tin grabbed her. He had his knives, but T-bird liked to use his fists. Oh God, ohgodohgod... it hurts, it hurts... stop, ohpleasepleaseplease...

Explosion! Fire! Everywhere. Must get out, must get out. It hurts, it hurts. So tired... tired...

It hurts...

The whimpering had stilled, and with it the terrible images, but they beat at his memory like the concussion of the explosion that had driven her into the night. With a cry of anguish not his own, he gave voice to her fear and despair, recoiling violently away from the lifeless body whose dying thoughts had invaded his own blank and vulnerable mind.

...But what am I?

An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson

[She is gone. Follow me now.]

Helplessly he looked to the crow to lead him away from this place of grief and pain. On they went, away from the flames, away from the latest of the city's tragedies. Into the cold, wet night the crow led the creature who had once been Eric Draven, led him to a dumpster with a discarded but serviceable pair of boots in it. And that was no less a miracle than his grave opening to spill him out into the rain — shoes of any kind were

hard to come by in this neighbourhood. But the crow was running things now and miracles were going to become commonplace.

With a dazed expression on his face, Eric picked up the boots, looking over at the crow like a dog trying to understand an unfamiliar command. Then slowly he reached down and drew them over his bare, wet feet with clumsy hands.

Finally the crow led him to a place he should have known well — if he'd been able to know anything beyond these heartless alleys — a fire escape ladder on the side of a tall, old building. But he recognised nothing, still following the crow's lead with no comprehension of how or why any of this was happening. And still no memory of anything else.

Up he went, shivering so hard by now that he could barely walk, much less climb a slippery ladder. He slipped more than once on the wet metal as he blindly followed the crow, and his clumsy, half-frozen body shuffled precariously across the cluttered rooftop with its deadly six-story drop on all sides. At last the crow led him to the roof access door and flew down the narrow stairwell, the walls echoing with the clatter of its wing-feathers, and Eric followed awkwardly, comprehension slowly growing in his mind.

The crow was on the stair railing now and Eric stood before the door to what once had been Shelly's home. It was still decorated with the foolishly grinning cardboard skeleton that she and Sarah had hung there over a year ago, but now it was barred with a length of yellow plastic tape. He had no idea what any of it meant or what he was supposed to do next.

[In there. Then you will know.]

Obediently he ripped the yellow tape aside with an unsteady hand and pushed the decorated door open. Warily, still shivering convulsively, he stepped into the dark, rain-drenched room. *Roof's leaking again*, the thought darted across his mind like a fish and was gone as he stared around the long-abandoned loft with its great, shattered round window.

> In a dark time, the eye begins to see.
>
> **— Theodore Roethke**

Memory battered at the closed doors of his mind as he took a few hesitant steps, then he stopped when a fluffy white apparition drifted out of the shadows... and meowed at him. A door opened, just a crack, and a name slipped through.

"Gabriel," he cried, as joyful to be able to remember something, *anything*, as he was to see the one-time pet. Gently he reached down to take the cat in his arms... and memory leapt at him like a spark of static electricity from the cat's fur...

> *Skank grabbed Gabriel — to wring his neck or throw him out the window or whatever — but Gabriel had been a street cat before he was a beloved house pet and he knew unkind hands when he felt them, and the level of noise and tension in the room already had him in a panic. Eighteen scimitar-claws and a mouthful of sharp rat-killing fangs ripped at the dangerous human hands and suddenly he was free to escape...*

With a guttural howl, Eric dropped the startled cat, recoiling across the room. But once the doors were opened, all the memories in the room leapt at him from ambush wherever he turned — like bloodstains they'd lingered, soaked deep into everything he touched — his and Shelly's. The whole loft resonated with them — he felt the pain like physical blows against his already battered body, suffered again through two waking nightmares...

> *She heard the fierce pounding on the door and for just a second thought it might be Eric. Eagerly she hurried over, but it was burst open by a cruel-faced man and three leering others. Sheer panic drove her backwards, then the smashing force of the leader's hand across her cheek...*
>
> *Their voices hammered at her: "Dept. of Housing... Code violations... safety hazards... place looks fine to me... let's redecorate..." None of it made any sense. All of it hurt...*
>
> *One of them held her down; he was the smallest of them, but she was helpless in his cruel hands, and could only watch in terror as the others ranged through her home destroying everything they touched, like a pack of ravening wolves...*

"'Abash'd the Devil stood,
And felt how awful goodness is, and saw
Virtue in her shape how lovely....'

It's pornography," the leader was reading, from her own book, from Paradise Lost, *defiling the words, defiling the very air she breathed. "Virtue?" he spat the word like the foulest obscenity...*

The black one had knives, but the other one kept using his fists. Nononono, don't, please don't hit me again. Hands, heavy clumsy hands, wouldn't let her go. Knives flashing. Blood, her own blood. Nonono, please, don't hurt me, please no more, nomorenomore... They ripped at her clothes like animals, and like a smaller animal, wounded to death, she tried helplessly to scuttle away from them...

"No, no, me first..." blond hair, leering, gleeful face, tattooed body arching over her... nonono, not that, please God not that. Help me, Eric, helpmehelpmehelp...

The door to Shelly's loft was open, there were terrifying, unnatural sounds coming from it. Something was wrong! Something was terribly wrong! In a growing panic he pushed the door open... and walked into chaos...

It was a scene out of his worst nightmare, and yet it was real. Four men had invaded the sanctuary of his love and destroyed it. Shelly! He had to get to Shelly, had to save her from these monsters. But they stood between him and Shelly and they wouldn't let him pass...

The knife caught him before he'd taken two steps inside. Desperate to get to Shelly, to protect her any way he could, he never even saw it coming or who had thrown it. Eight inches to the hilt it embedded itself in his chest, spinning him down to collapse in agony a dozen feet... a thousand miles... from Shelly...

He writhed on the floor of Shelly's once joyful home, his hands on the knife transfixing him, slippery with his scarlet blood. With an effort that cost him nearly all the life he had left, he pulled the alien thing out of his body and threw it away from him. Then he lifted his blurring eyes and searched helplessly for Shelly, trying to find the one who meant more to him than his own life. Then he found her, on the bed, and saw what they were doing to her, what

they had already done to her. A bitter determination transfigured him as he forced his dying body to struggle those last few feet to her...

"Shelly!" he gasped, with breath he couldn't spare, stretching out his bloodied hand to her. And Shelly saw him and called out his name, straining her own hand uselessly. But he couldn't reach her — those others were in the way, he had to go through them before he could be with Shelly again... and they weren't going to let him through. They ranged before him like hungry jackals and blocked his every hope, even as his life flowed out of him in an ever-widening lake of blood...

They dragged him to his feet, one on each side, holding his limp body spread-eagle between them like a grotesque parody of the crucifixion, while two others took aim with their ugly pistols. He was dying already, there was no need to torment him any more; but they were drunk on their own violence and lusting after savagery...

The bullets hit him like a battering ram. His face writhed with shock, then relaxed into the bewildered softness of a reproachful infant, as the bullets propelled him backwards through the crystal panes of the beautiful round window, to fall in a rain of glass and blood onto the sidewalk below...

He'd already suffered through it once, but the hideous brutality of those memories was more than he could endure. It was too much. He howled in mindless agony as he lived again the pain and terror of that night. There was no respite, no escape from the barrage of memory, like land-mines lurking for him in everything he touched. From wall to wall he recoiled, clutching his head against the unendurable pain, trying to flee what could not be fled.

He ran from it all, galvanised by despair. He bounded onto the platform and leapt in violent denial through the once beautiful round window. *This time, Shelly, I* will *reach you*, he thought as his body hurtled into space.

[You will not find her there.]

The message arrowed into his mind, and at the last instant, his hands shot up and grabbed the sturdy iron of the surrounding lunettes, still lined with razored glass that bit deeply into

his palms. Between his clinging hands, the broken bars formed the sign of a cross... but there was no salvation there for either of them.

The force of his leap carried his body swinging far out into the slanting rain that laced the night sky, until he lifted above the horizontal and hung there for an eternity before gravity drew him back into the room. He dropped from the iron bar with a twist of his body that was as graceful as it was anguished, to land crouching in unanswerable grief on the floor of the loft.

He held his slashed palms dumbly before his face and welcomed the merely physical pain they offered him. Then, to his astonishment, the blood oozed back into the lacerations and the edges closed smoothly over and the skin of his palms was whole again, denying him the pain, the absolution, he yearned for.

> Still falls the Rain —
> Dark as the world of man, black as our loss —
> Blind as the... nails
> Upon the Cross.
>
> **— Edith Sitwell**

Sarah had finished her hotdog even though her appetite had deserted her and her stomach had knotted up in fear as soon as she'd heard the explosion. "I *hate* Devil's Night," she murmured unnecessarily to Mickey, who was staring nervously past her at the reflections of the flames on the windows across the street.

"Yeah, me too, and it's not even supposed to start until tomorrow. God, what if they're turning it into a two-nighter?" He seemed more depressed than worried by the idea, but Sarah was horrified — *two* nights of this? She could barely handle one!

Finally she couldn't stand it any longer and disobeyed Albrecht's order to dash down the wet street and join the other

curious onlookers and try to find out what was going on. She wasn't surprised to see that it was the Arcade that had gotten blown up — word on the streets was that Alison, who ran it, had been butting heads with Top Dollar for a couple of months now, although you would've thought they'd hit it tomorrow night instead of tonight. Maybe T-Bird was booked solid, she decided, having a pretty good idea who'd done it.

There were fire trucks and an ambulance and lots of police cars all around, and the fire looked like it was going to burn a long time in spite of the rain that was falling heavily. Sarah saw Albrecht some distance away looking tired and harassed... no, she wasn't going to bother him for a ride home with all this going on, she thought, heading back to Mickey's, but she wasn't going to hang around any of it either.

She told the curious counterman what she'd seen and left a message for Albrecht with him, then skated quickly away into the rainy night, leaving all the noise and the flashing lights behind. A shroud of Loneliness closed around her as soon as she left her friends; she hated being alone anymore, not like before she met Shelly and Eric, when she'd been used to it — now it ate away at her, like rust on iron. Everything, everything in her world was corroding into dust — she wondered how long it would take before there was nothing left of her.

What would've happened if I'd stayed with Shelly last year, she wondered, not for the first time. She'd dropped by the loft after school that day, and Shelly'd wanted her to stay the night with them, even though the wedding was the next day and she had a million things to do. *What would've happened if I'd been there?* Stupid question though, the same thing would've happened to her as it did to Shelly — beaten, raped, killed — no matter that she was just a ten-year-old kid. Nothing like that would've stopped them... whoever *they* were.

And that was almost the worst part — not knowing who *they* were; time and time again this past year she had looked into the faces of the punks who were commoner than rats in this neighbourhood and wondered: Did *he* rape Shelly? Did *he* stab Eric? And she never knew, was never going to find out.

Shelly and Eric were dead, and their murderers walked the streets alive... sometimes Sarah wished she *had* been there with Shelly. And sometimes she was afraid she'd be joining them anyway, whether she wanted to or not.

Nah, I'm tough. I'll survive. I don't need anybody, she told herself morosely, knowing she lied, but unwilling to admit it... even to herself.

Darla wasn't home (as usual) and there wasn't a scrap of food in the place. Sarah turned on her heel and left the apartment, unexpectedly angry at something that happened all the time these days. Well, she knew where to find Darla.

> The land is full of blood, and the city full of perverseness.
>
> **— Ezekiel 9:9**

It was called The Pit, which was a classier name than it deserved, and it was T-bird's favourite hangout... for a lot of reasons. One of which was that the place let them get away with the kind of screwing around his crew liked to do, another being that one of that same crew lived upstairs.

They were a tight bunch of guys — none of them overly bright and all of them mean skunks. He was a good decade older than any of them, but they followed him loyally, old boonie rat that he was, because they knew that without him they were just a bunch of fuckin' bolos.

Right now they were just kicking back and enjoying themselves before he had to go in and report to Top Dollar on the Arcade job.. By this time, they were already on their third round of drinks and Funboy wanted to try something different.

T-bird watched incuriously as Funboy took a bullet and challenged all of them with it, then tossed it jauntily into the air like it was a beer nut. For a moment it spun hypnotically, then disappeared into Funboy's mouth as he gulped it down with a manful swallow of hard liquor. Now that *was* a good trick, T-bird thought, adding his voice to the admiring comments, but he knew another.

"See if you can top that, man? Can you top *that?*" Funboy boasted, a grin of triumph splitting his handsome, dissipated face — he looked like a seventeen-year-old bully who'd grown older and meaner, but had never outgrown his adolescent rawness, like an ageing surfer with his long blond hair and smiley-face t-shirt... who'd never been nearer the ocean than a morphine dream. He lived on the edge, T-bird thought, but he didn't have any imagination, which was why T-bird had made him part of the

crew — he always did exactly what he was told to do, and with an enthusiasm that was gratifying to watch.

So, he doesn't think I can top him, T-bird thought slyly, putting a bullet on his tongue and talking carefully around it. "Here's to Devil's Night, my new favourite holiday," he toasted them, looking forward to tomorrow night's profitable activities, then washed it down with his drink. *Nothin' to that, but here comes the kicker*, he thought, anticipating their reaction, then he stubbed out his cigar on his wet tongue, to the accompaniment of some impressive sizzles, a cloud of smoke, and a satisfying round of exclamations from his crew.

He'd learned the trick in 'Nam — it was easy if you knew how: which was to have the tongue good and wet, the cigar nearly out... and enough booze and drugs in you that you didn't give a damn if you swallowed a flame-thrower. And it impressed the hell out of his crew, which was the whole point.

"You sick fuckhead!" Funboy groaned admiringly, his unshaven face blank with astonishment.

"Are you out of your mother-fuckin' mind, man?" Tin Tin growled, his truculent black features twisted in a combination of disgust and awe. But that changed in an instant when he saw the weaselly little man seated next to him start to lift his glass.

Tin Tin was easily the biggest man in his crew and could make two of wiry little Skank. With a contemptuous gesture, he forced Skank's hand down, ignoring the other's outraged appeal to T-bird. T-bird just grinned and watched while Tin Tin quickly downed *his* bullet-and-booze cocktail, then smirked at Skank.

"Pussies drink last, man," Tin Tin explained pityingly, as if to a retarded child.

Well, maybe Skank wasn't all that bright, and if Funboy was stuck at seventeen years old, Skank had never made it past twelve; but he was just as tough and mean as the worst of them, and he didn't like being bullied by Tin Tin. He surged to his feet and pulled out his gun.

"Fuck you, Tin Tin," he spat, in his thick mush-mouthed voice, holding the gun to the black man's temple.

"Shit ain't even loaded, man," Tin Tin mocked, standing up himself, drawing one of his many knives and thrusting it like an

extension of his hand to Skank's scrawny throat. The smaller man pulled back from the razor sharp blade in sudden dismay. But help came from an unexpected quarter.

"This one *is*!" Funboy snarled, on his feet and pointing *his* gun at Tin Tin, more as an excuse for a good fight than to defend Skank. Tin Tin had already drawn a second knife to counter Funboy's threat, when T-bird decided it was time to slap his little wolf cubs back into order.

Bouncing to his feet, he grabbed Skank's gun and pulled it down, pointing his gun at each in turn, noting with satisfaction the tiny flinches each one made as they stared down the barrel. "Which one of you motor-city mother-fuckers wants to bet me *this* one *isn't*?" he snapped at them like a drill sergeant.

Message received!

Then he grinned, letting them off the hook. "Hey! Fire it up! Fire it up!" he chanted, pumping his arms in their rallying call, and they joined him, letting off their high spirits with cries of "Fire it up!" instead of mayhem. Sometimes it was a real bitch keeping them from killing each other, and that Tin Tin was the worst, the way he pushed dumbass Skank around all the time. But, hell, he wouldn't have them any other way.

"Here's your shooters," said the pretty but slatternly waitress, Darla, bringing them their next round of drinks. "Put your guns away, huh, guys," she begged ineffectually, but probably only because the bartender told her to say that. Then she smiled with seductive affection at Funboy and bent down to give him a lingering kiss — those two had been an item for months, and probably for months to come... as long as Funboy kept supplying her with drugs.

Not that she was averse to sharing her "affections" with any of them, T-Bird thought with some amusement as he watched Tin Tin lean over and lick the woman provocatively on the arm like she was a particularly tasty piece of candy... which she was.

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered, if outlived,
As freezing persons recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go — .

— Emily Dickinson

The cockroach chittered confidently across the wet wood — there had been some noise earlier, but all was quiet now, and it didn't sense the cat anywhere near... it didn't sense anything anywhere near.

And it never sensed the great black bird that swooped suddenly upon it, effortlessly snatching it from the floor and carrying it to a dry perch, where it began ripping the tasty insect apart with its powerful beak. The bird spared a moment to glance at the figure huddled across the room from him, then went back to its snack. Not yet. The man wasn't ready yet... but soon...

Eric had finally come to rest, hunched before Shelly's dressing table, the harlequin mask he'd once teased her with in happier days still hanging mutely from the mirror. He had pushed away a few of the shadows by surrounding himself with dozens of flickering candles — their delicate light illuminated the ugly ridged scars of bullet and knife on his muscular back and chest as he wept, and every tear he shed scalded his soul. With trembling hands he caressed the last few undamaged treasures that Shelly had worn and loved...

> *"Boo," he teased gently, holding the mask to his face, but she only smiled indulgently at him. Ruefully he lowered it, his own lips curling into a sweeter smile than the painted one on the mask.*

All the sweet, loving memories poured across his mind like acid, searing his every thought. He thought he'd already endured all the pain that could be endured, but these memories sent him past every conceivable limit...

"Oh... oh boy! The dismay in her voice had him moving before he even knew what was wrong. Then he saw the flames dancing in the saucepan and knew that another one of her "experiments" had gone awry. Deftly he smothered the little blaze and guided her firmly away from the stove.

"Restaurant," he said jauntily, manfully suppressing the urge to tease her about this latest culinary disaster.

At last, nearly all the doors of his mind stood open, all the raw gaping wounds lay bare before his waking thoughts... and they crushed him. Everything he touched yielded its bitter fruits of memory and filled him with more grief than he could bear, but he had no place to flee from them...

"Don't even think of it," she giggled from the bathtub, while he leered at her with mock lasciviousness. "Eric! Two people can't fit in here!... I'm serious!"

"So am I," he said moving closer, chuckling diabolically as he dropped the towel around his waist. A great splash drowned out her giggling protests.

"Okay, wiseguy, you're mopping that... oooh..." She never finished what she'd been about to say.

He was there again, with Shelly, in those suffocating memories — laughing, playing, making music. He hugged them to himself in spite of their acid fingers, like a drug whose lure he could not resist...

Her joy fed him, her laughter warmed him, her love transfigured him. She was as brilliant as the sun, as luminous as the moon, he couldn't stop looking at her, couldn't stop thinking about her. Every song he made was a paean to her and to their love...

He knelt before her, worshipping her body with his own. Her eyes were smoky with passion as she drew him to her, shuddering as his lips set her on fire...

God, you bastard. How could you do that to her? His tortured mental cry, his first coherent thought since he'd awakened, lashed through his mind like a bullwhip.

How could you make something so soft and innocent and beautiful and then destroy it? How could you do that? How could you make her suffer like that? You bastard.

But it wasn't God who was to blame after all. It was himself — he had failed her, his beloved, left her undefended to suffer... to suffer...

But no, *no*! To think that was intolerable! He crushed the thought out of his awareness, but still it lurked in the dark corners of his mind like the subtlest of poisons: colourless, odourless, tasteless... and lethal!

With a strangled cry of anguish that ripped his throat and his wounded heart, he drove his fist into Shelly's mirror, shattering the images in his mind before they destroyed him completely. He caught a glimpse of his ravaged face in the spider-web mosaic of the crazed glass, then swept the candles to hiss into darkness on the floor, and wept for a loss he could not bear.

The crow turned its fathomless gaze upon the shuddering man who wept among the spilled candles. Now... now it was time.

> And he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing.... According to their deeds, accordingly he will repay, fury to his adversaries, recompence to his enemies.
>
> **— Isaiah 59:17-18**

Then, when it seemed that he would be crushed under the intolerable pressure, a cold purpose flowed over him, sealing him off from his pain, and layering him away from the past. He reached outward with his rage, turning it away from his own vulnerable guilt.

"*Sometimes, when everything else has been stolen, all there is left, is revenge.*" Where had he heard that before? It didn't matter — it was true, and he was going to take all that he had left in both hands and wield it like a sword against those who had taken everything else from him.

This time he would make it through them. This time he would reach Shelly.

The makeup kit that Shelly had bought for that lost Halloween had waited patiently for him all these months, and now grimly he began his transformation: Man into harlequin mask. Death-white face, mocking black-slashed and shadowed clown-eyes, and black spectral lips, curling in a sneering, counterfeit smile. His once kind, handsome face vanished beneath the devil's mask, and he shuddered inwardly at the hardness there that shut him off from what he had been. But Shelly was the only one in his thoughts now — Shelly... and revenge.

He discarded the last of his burial clothing and found the well-travelled case and lifted out the black leather second-skin that had once been his signature costume in Hangman's Joke.

Strength had returned along with the memories, and he dressed with unconscious grace. Now once again these clothes would be his signature, but this time there would be no joke — this Hangman was as serious as death.

The crow came to rest on his shoulder as he stalked across the ruined loft to the shattered window and stood with clenched fists looking out over the city: Grim Death and the carrion crow, ready to claim their own.

> For I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.
>
> **— Isaiah 63:3-4**

"Couple more rings — that's twenty-four k," Tin Tin bragged, while the greasy, fat, ugly little man known only as Gideon pawed through the scattered loot on the pawnshop counter. Gideon was one of the scavengers of the neighbourhood, skulking around the heels of the predators, hating them almost as much as they hated him.

"Twenty-four k, huh? It's *Eighteen* k. Crap! It's probably fake." Gideon squinted at the ring in disgust, sneering at the arrogant black face watching him expectantly. Now the asshole was bragging about the purse, like *leather* was something special. "Jeez. What's this, Tin Tin, a bloodstain that's on here?" That Tin Tin was a real dumbass, Gideon thought, not trying to hide the sneer on his face, but he knew how to keep the motherfucker on a short leash. Big, mean... and *stupid*! That was Tin Tin all right.

"I'll give you fifty bucks. I hate charities. Now you — take it or leave it." He watched smugly as Tin Tin tapped his fingers on the counter, torn between greed and anger. "Decisions, decisions," he smirked, then grunted in satisfaction when the other snatched up the money.

But Tin Tin couldn't leave the insult unchallenged, and he backed out of the pawnshop in a cold rage. "Cheap ass, chrome-domed, child molestin', saprophyte motherfucker," he snarled viciously, trying to salvage his pride.

"Lock the gate when you go out," Gideon ordered, impervious to that kind of baiting, although the one about "chrome-domed" stung a little.

"Ah close this up fo' yo' reeeeal good, massah! Fuck you!" Tin Tin blustered in mocking humility, thrusting out his middle finger, but impotent to do more than hurl insults at the little slug's head. Gideon was "under the dragon's wing" as much as he was, so he couldn't stab the fatass like he really wanted to.

"Sit on it and twirl," the little pawnbroker muttered, determined to have the last word, but Tin Tin pretended not to hear as he slammed the steel grating shut and hooked the padlock

securely over it. He was tempted to leave it open and see what kind of trouble found its way into the pawnshop, but that wasn't the kind of temptation it was healthy to indulge in. Top Dollar would want to know who was responsible.

Leaving the securely locked shop behind him, Tin Tin strode off into the night rain, a lean black animal, angry and hungry and looking for prey.

> The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him.
>
> **— Numbers 35:19**

The dark city flashed by below, lights reflecting from a kaleidoscope of rain-slick surfaces — the crow was on the wing, hunting for a hunter. Far below it, the tiny figure of a man caught his eye, and it wheeled with a triumphant caw. Back it sped, in a swift crow's flight, back to the silent spectre waiting for it high above the quiet streets; and with a flash of wing, led him in earth-bound flight across the rooftops.

It was like a dream — he'd had dreams before of running like this — tirelessly, easily, leaping from building to building with inhuman strength and grace, his teeth bared in a feral grin as he tested the powers of his resurrected body. He was no ghost — there was heat and blood and weight to his body. He felt the impact of the rooftops against the soles of his boots, felt the even pounding of his heart and the rush of air in his lungs. But there was no fatigue, no pain; the rain didn't chill him anymore, and his strength never faltered.

He'd always been strong and graceful — taking the stairs two-at-a-time, dancing on stage with the band — but this was like nothing human he'd ever known, and he ran with a hot elation. The lowering clouds and the rain-drenched air ate what little light there was, but still he could see — a glowing luminosity

lit everything he turned his eyes upon and guided his feet on a sure path. He followed the crow, linked to it, seeing the night spread out before him in a shifting double vision, as sure and swift of foot as the fleetest deer, or like some agile, arboreal ape, swinging through a rooftop rain-forest canopy.

[You run like a warrior. You are the unleashed arrow. Tonight we shall drink the blood of your enemies.]

The crow dipped into a ghost-lit alley splashed with shadows from an oil-drum fire, and turned its hunter's eye upon the hunter — Tin Tin strode down the alley, shaking the rain off his braided mane and paused to light a cigarette at the fitful flames of the oil-drum.

Tin Tin of the deadly knives, Tin Tin who'd cut Shelly's white skin, who'd thrown the knife that had killed Eric. He was too quick, too strong... he was a dead man.

Eric saw his quarry through the crow's skewed vision, and felt his Purpose gather itself around him. Three stories below, a dead man awaited him — two dead men would meet tonight, and only one would walk away. He stood on the edge of a sheer thirty foot wall and offered himself to gravity as gracefully as a diver, dropping down to land heavily but unharmed amongst the trash of a thousand lives.

Once before he had fallen, into a spinning, endless night, letting go of everything that he had been or would become; but this time, as the full realisation of the power he now possessed spread through his mind, he threw back his head and laughed — wild, triumphant... ghostly.

Tin Tin stiffened when he heard the maniacal laughter echoing eerily across the alley-way, but his tension eased when he saw the slender figure approaching him through the rain. He had no fear of the merely human, not on his own turf and with his "friends" with him.

"What the fuck you all painted up for, crackhead, huh?" he taunted, as the silent spectre advanced steadily towards him, "Halloween ain't 'til mañana." Okay, the freako wanted to fight? That was fine with Tin Tin — *he* wanted to kill somebody. He threw away his cigarette and snatched out his knife. "C'mon!" he challenged, eager for battle.

He shoved the flaming barrel into Eric's path, but Eric threw himself at Tin Tin in a rush of such sudden ferocity that it caught the other unawares, wary street-fighter though he was. The mud of the filthy alleyway sprayed outward from their skidding bodies as they hit the ground, then Eric pinned the larger man down, grabbed his flailing hands and held the deadly knives away from him, his face twisted into unrecognisability by a snarl of animal fury. Then Eric jerked the heavier man to his feet and threw him almost casually across the alley, more easily than Tin Tin had thrown Shelly across the loft. He had never moved with such brutal savagery, and it filled him with fiery exultation — this violent killing rage of a grown man who has lost everything that he loved.

But he had to be violent to survive a battle like this. Tin Tin threw his fist at Eric's head, a terrible blow that should have shattered his skull, but all he did was shake it off and dive back at Tin Tin with a death's-head leer. Again and again the big man struck crippling blows that Eric shrugged off with little more than shouts of passing pain — even a vicious kick that landed between his legs did no more than double him over for a few seconds.

He was only toying with Tin Tin — bouncing him against the alley wall with punishing backhand smacks that left him stunned but still fighting. With one careless blow he knocked Tin Tin's knife out of his hand, sending it tumbling through the air to land amongst the hissing coals of the spilled fire. He was almost enjoying himself.

He thrilled with bloodthirsty delight as he realised how incredibly strong he was, and how nearly impervious to pain and injury he had become. He remembered the cuts from the window healing in seconds on his palms, and knew he was experiencing more miracles and wonders.

"Murderer! Murderer!" he yelled, as, with a fierce irresistible strength, he flung Tin Tin twenty feet across the alley where he slammed against the wall and lay stunned at its base. Eric followed with a quick leap and immobilised him with pitiless hands, one fist drawn back for a killing blow. But he didn't deliver it. No... that would be too quick, too easy — Tin Tin was going to have to die knowing *why* he died.

"I ain’t murdered nobody, man. I don't fuckin' *know* you, man. What the fuck you *want*, man?" Tin Tin gasped, shaken as he'd

never been shaken in his life — the guy was so damned *strong*, and nothing he did seemed to hurt him.

"I want you to tell me a story — a man and a woman in a loft, a year ago." Eric's voice was harsh, out of breath after the violence of their struggle.

"You're outta your motherfuckin' *mind*!"

"Listen!" Eric barked hoarsely, pressing his forearm across Tin Tin's throat. "I'm sure you'll remember. You killed him... on Halloween."

Tin Tin fought for air, blustering through his growing fear. "Yeah, yeah, man, look... on Halloween, yeah. Some dude. Some bitch. Whatever."

Eric slapped his face, slamming his head against the wall, and stared at him with blazing eyes. "Her name was *Shelly*," he snarled, fighting for control. Tin Tin was quick to spot the weakness in his enemy and he spat in Eric's face, hoping to break that control. He almost succeeded. Through gritted teeth, Eric accused him, "You cut her! You raped her!"

> *Through a haze of pain Shelly saw the black face grinning lasciviously at her. Fire ripped across her skin, again and again, and he laughed, holding his bloody knife before her terrified eyes, and lapped her blood off of its gleaming surface with an obscene leer. Hands... hands... they would not let her scream.*

"Shelly... yeah, I shanked her pink ass and she *loved* it," Tin Tin crowed obscenely, waiting for the flinch he knew would come. Eric bowed his head, wounded by his memories and more vulnerable to those poisonous words than he'd been to physical blows.

Tin Tin struck then, darting his head forward like the viper he was, stunning Eric to his knees. Tin Tin's groping hands found a heavy iron pipe and he swung it heavily across the smaller man, again and again, in spine-crushing, killing blows.

"Murderer! Murderer!" Eric gasped hoarsely, dazed and stricken, as Tin Tin danced triumphantly away.

"Let me tell you about murder: it's fun, it's easy," Tin Tin gloated, back in control again. "You gonna learn aaall about it." But Eric already knew more about murder than Tin Tin could

ever imagine, and on this cold wet night, Eric was going to be his teacher.

Arrogant in his ignorance, Tin Tin laughed, and with deadly ease snatched out two killing knives and carved the air flamboyantly; then, like a bullfighter confident of his victim, he turned his back and stalked away, shrugging off his long leather coat. When he'd reached the distance he favoured for throwing, he turned and boasted, "I'd like you to meet two buddies of mine. We never miss." But his confidence slipped a little when he saw his supposedly crippled opponent rise unsteadily to his feet and begin to come after him again.

He threw his first knife, a blurring flash straight to Eric's heart, but Eric stood easily before his adversary now, ducking with a swift, economical movement, and the blade passed harmlessly over his head. "Try harder," he said grimly, straightening up and walking forward.

The second knife flashed, and Eric batted it aside with a quick, careless movement of one hand. "Try again," he challenged, still coming on. He caught the third knife in his hands, effortlessly stopping its deadly trajectory just inches away from his face. Tin Tin gasped in stunned disbelief.

Then baring his teeth in a devil's snarl, Eric threw the evil blade back towards its owner, pinning him against a stack of pallets like a fly in a specimen case. And finally, as his "friends" were turned against him one by one, Tin Tin knew what it felt like to be afraid, knew what Shelly had felt.

"Victims," Eric whispered grimly, snatching yet another knife from his enemy, "aren't we all?" His hand descended, and there was the crunch of steel into flesh.

Two dead men met in an alley... and only one walked away.

Club Trash was jammin'! Hundreds of young people crammed into the tight space, moving like a great herd of sweating cattle, mindlessly swaying to the band that filled the air with sound as thick as summer smog. The walls were lined with publicity photos of the many bands who'd played there in the past, and lost among them was one which read: Hangman's Joke.

"Look at this mess," T-bird barked in disgust, as he and Skank rudely shoved their way through the oblivious masses. "What's the world coming to?" Stupid assholes all of them, coming down here looking for thrills. He'd like to give them a few thrills, starting with that sexy chick singing up there on the stage, shaking her tail and coming on to everybody like she was aching for the gang rape to end all gang rapes. But business before pleasure.

"I gotta go upstairs — report from the front," he told Skank, leaving the little man eagerly ordering drinks at the bar. Dumbass Skank — wasn't even looking twice at the singer — he'd rather grab Darla's brat in an alley when he thought no one was looking. Then again, maybe he had something there — the kid was starting to turn into a real baby fox. Hmmm, they ought to be able to put her to good use pretty soon... if she hadn't already started free-lancing. Then he put Sarah out of his mind for the moment — he had important business to attend to.

"Get out of my way, you worms," T-bird shouted angrily, as he elbowed his way through the stinking mass of humanity, finally breaking free at a well-guarded stairwell. He passed the watchdogs with a nod of his head — they knew him here. Quickly he began to climb.

"Why don't you ladies come back later, check me out?" T-bird heard that rich voice long before he saw its owner — Grange, the sophisticated black man with the Mephistopheles beard who carried enough weaponry concealed under his expensive suits to hold off an entire SWAT team single-handedly... not that any SWAT team would ever be dumb enough to invade Top Dollar's domain, or could even get within a mile of it without tipping him off.

Right now he was coming on to two luscious bunnies with all the confidence of a big cat, he was almost purring when he turned his attention from them to T-bird who joined them on the landing.

"Hey, guess what?" T-bird announced smugly, "Arcade Games fell down, went boom."

"Boom?" Grange lifted an eyebrow.

"Can you imagine that? 'S tragic," T-bird mocked, shaking his head in counterfeit dismay.

But Grange wasn't interested in his games. Not when there was business to attend to. "Gather your soldiers. You're on for tomorrow night, no sweat." He gave T-bird a tight smile. Oh yeah, there would be work a-plenty for *all* of them tomorrow night.

"Is *The Man* in?" T-bird asked, a little warily. He wanted to make his report and get it over with — Top Dollar was not someone he liked to spend too much time with, him and that *woman* of his. He ran this neighbourhood like a god, but not one it was comfortable... or safe... to be around.

But then Grange really did smile, knowingly. "He's 'taking a meeting'," he said, winking lewdly, and T-bird didn't care to speculate on the nature of that "meeting".

> Cruelty, very far from being a vice, is the first sentiment Nature injects in us all.... Absurd then to maintain cruelty is a consequence of depravity.... Cruelty is simply the energy in a man civilisation has not yet altogether corrupted: therefore it is a virtue, not a vice.
>
> **— Marquis de Sade**

A man and a woman moved languorously on the whispering silken sheets of an enormous bed, their passions spent for the moment. Another woman lay motionless beside them. The man lifted himself on one elbow and delicately kissed the bruise which was slowly blossoming over the woman's ribs, and chuckled deep in his throat.

He was a handsome man — a perfect subject for the Renaissance painters... if they ever needed a model for Lucifer. His hair was beautiful, longer than the woman's, and it fell like a veil over his naked shoulders, clinging in places to the drying sweat, limning the bizarre tattoos that decorated his body. He had a fine voice, rich and deep, that never seemed to be without a sneer in it.

He was known as Top Dollar, and the woman was his half-sister, Myca.

"Does that hurt?" he asked, caressing the bruise.

"Pain is power," she hissed, with a quick intake of breath.

"Hah! You sound like that witch, your mother."

"She taught me much."

"Well, *my* mother taught me *this*," he purred in his dark voice, kissing her full breasts and taking her nipple between his teeth. "Are you ready for seconds?" he asked, anticipation turning the question into a growl.

She watched him impassively through half-lidded almond eyes, her oriental features as inscrutable as the stereotype would have them. When she didn't answer, he bit her, lightly at first, then harder until she was writhing in abandon beneath him. He tasted blood on his tongue before she gasped her assent, pulling his face to hers and licking her own blood off of his lips.

He took her as ungently as she demanded, permitting her to draw *his* blood with her wicked long nails. The violence of their coupling would have shocked the punkers dancing mindlessly in the club below, but Top Dollar and his sister knew all the rules of this little game — they'd been playing it for a long, long time.

After a while they slept.

Top Dollar was restless and discontented, even after the games with his sister and her latest "playmate". And it disturbed him that he didn't know why. He gazed impassively at his sister's voluptuous body while she showered, her movements languid and sensuous under the steaming spray of three shower heads. It was a beguiling picture she made, framed by the open doorway and surrounded by glittering black tile, a tattoo making a brilliant splash of colour down the delicious curve of her back.

But he turned away from her and focused on the little crystal globe he held pensively in one hand, watching the tiny snowflakes swirl around the macabre miniature grave-yard enclosed within it.

"You are thinking about the past," his sister said, sitting down beside him, her exotic face enigmatic.

"Dad gave me this... fifth birthday. Told me: 'childhood's over the minute you know you're gonna die.'" He shook the little globe and passed it sombrely over to her.

"And on *my* fifth birthday, he gave me *you*," she mused reminiscently.

"I thought it was the other way around," he snorted.

"That is what you were *meant* to think," she said, with sly complaisance, then she looked intently at him, focusing on the present once more.

"It is the dream again — there are forces gathering against you. You must find out what they are." Her almond eyes glittered as she kissed his forehead in an erotic benison. "Tell me what you saw."

"Just the usual," he said, his sardonic voice dark with frustration. "Something's watching me... and waiting."

"This time it was different." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah. This time was the last time — I could feel it. It won't be just a dream anymore, and it's not gonna be satisfied with just watching. It begins tonight... and ends tomorrow."

"For the last year, you have been having this dream of the watcher. And I cannot find out why! Something is blocking me!"

She quivered in outrage at the thought — she was not used to being forestalled in this way. She looked at him with her fathomless black eyes. "And what is there about tonight that draws it?"

"I don't know about tonight, but as for tomorrow, you know that as well as I do, little sister. My own Devil's Night. And if the 'forces' gathering against me are because of my sins on that night of nights, then they're a vast multitude and even you won't be able to hold them at bay. But, if it's nothin' more than a bad dream, then I got nothin' to worry about, do I?" His words were mocking, but not his tone — there was so much deadly promise repeated each time he had that dream that he was forced to take it seriously.

"Devil's Night — that is the key." Then she dismissed the puzzle from her mind — she had other ways to solve it. Her gaze drifted across the gleaming silk of the tangled bedsheets until it caressed the lush, odalisque curves of the unmoving female form. "Is she asleep?" she asked, almost idly.

Her brother reached over with a careless hand to roll the woman onto her back, the splendid globes of her breasts glowing like a Renoir painting, her lovely eyes staring sightlessly into infinity. "I think we broke *her*," he said with a dismissive sniff — they never lasted long in the games he and Myca liked to play, the janitor was welcome to her now... as soon as Myca had finished with her. He leaned back appreciatively to watch his sister at work.

The knife she lifted in her delicate hand looked more like a piece of jewellery than a cutting blade, but it was sharper than the finest scalpel. Caressing the dead woman's face, she traced a languid finger around the staring, priceless eyes. "I love her eyes... pretty."

There was no blood, of course, at least, not enough to stain the sheets, and Myca knew well how to extract her prizes with the least amount of untidiness. "All the power resides in the eyes," she whispered when she had finished. "I shall find your watcher for you, and we will destroy it."

He took her then, carelessly elbowing the dead woman out of his way, all his discontent forgotten in a great tidal wash of carnality.

"Grange, tell me what we did last Devil's Night." Myca stared piercingly at the elegant black man lounging attentively across the table from her. Grange's phenomenal memory, powers of observation, and attention to detail were all the records she needed to consult. He nodded, his handsome face cool and impassive, his intelligent eyes concealing any hint of curiosity about her request — time and time again she had interrogated him like this, learning more from his reports than he ever put into them. There were those who wondered how Top Dollar knew the things he did to run his criminal empire so effectively, but Grange knew... and the answer sat before him now, looking purely decorative, but with a mind and eyes that saw through the secrets of the world.

He began enumerating every fire set that night, but they ran to scores and she stopped him impatiently. "No, it is not a fire. It has not the *feel* of a fire. What else?" she demanded, unsatisfied, cupping two soft pieces of excised flesh in her hand. "Help me to *see*," she whispered to them, while Grange went on with his recitation.

"... then there was Shelly Webster and Eric Draven. She was organising the tenants at 1929 Calderon Court Apartments to fight evictions. T-bird's crew went to change her mind. They exceeded their instructions slightly when her boyfriend caught them at work and ended up killing them both. No heirs or grieving relatives. And, of course, no witnesses and no arrests."

"Dead? Both of them?"

"Dead and buried... unless you want to count the ghost."

"Ghost? Tell me of this 'ghost'." She leaned forward, a strange otherworldly *knowing* burning in her eyes.

"Nothing much to tell. Some of the tenants said they saw or heard *something* on the top floor. Did us a favour anyway — cleared the building out damned fast. It's been empty for nearly a year now."

"It's on the list then, ain't it?" Top Dollar drawled, joining them. "Maybe we'll toast the ghost tomorrow night. That'll end it for sure."

"Another thing," Grange added thoughtfully, "Draven was in a band — Hangman's Joke. They played at the club a few times... think there's a connection?"

"Hangman's Joke? Ooooh, I'm getting scared," Top Dollar mocked lazily.

His sister frowned. "No. Eric Draven is not your watcher, but there is a link. I still cannot *see*, but I shall be ready. Tonight, all will be made clear."

Yes, tonight. Let her brother play with his fires and his petty thugs, *this* was the real power — to *see*... and to act upon what was seen.

> Parents, you have caused my misfortune, and you have caused your own.
>
> **— Arthur Rimbaud**

"Hey, kid! Get the hell outta the road!"

Sarah ignored the angry cabdriver as she dodged skilfully through the sparse traffic. *So? Run me down! See if I care*, she thought angrily as she approached The Pit, warily scanning the sidewalk and nearby alleyways — the last time she'd come here she'd taken a short cut and run into Skank who'd been taking a piss in the alley... lucky for her T-bird had been in a hurry that night. Well, at least there was no sign of them out here now, but her skin crawled at the thought of going into the bar after Darla... at least she had an ally of sorts in the bartender. With a determined air, she went down the steps to the sleazy bar's sunken entrance, pushed it open and went in. The smoky interior was hardly brighter than outside, but there was enough light to see Darla sitting spraddle-legged on the lap of her current — and to Sarah's mind, worst — "boyfriend", Funboy.

Sarah had despised all of Darla's "boyfriends", but she hated Funboy with a passion... and feared him. Mostly, he treated her with contempt, but every now and then, she'd catch him looking at her with a kind of scary speculation, and she didn't want to know whatever it was he was planning for her, although she had a pretty good idea. *Like mother, like daughter*, isn't that what people said? And eleven wasn't to young to start... hell, she knew kids her age who'd been at it for *years*.

But not her, not Sarah! She'd been Shelly and Eric's friend, and she'd never disappoint them by going into sex and drugs like Darla. She'd fight them every chance she got, like right now! she thought, sitting down at the table where Darla and Funboy were practically doing it in front of everybody, and cleared her throat pointedly to get their attention.

Almost groggily, the slatternly young woman looked over and saw the little girl staring accusingly at her, and had the grace to feel a moment of shame.

"Told ya to stay outta here," she muttered defensively, letting her eyes slide away from her daughter, as if she couldn't bear to look at her... or be looked at.

"So, I guess you're not gonna be home 'til a lot later, huh, *Darla*?" Sarah challenged her scornfully, hiding the hurt that gnawed at her with the skill that only comes after long experience.

"She's *busy!*" Funboy sneered, looking at her up and down in the way that always made her feel wormy inside. "Go play with your dolls or something, okay" he suggested mockingly, giving her that stupid open-mouthed *waiting* look that most grown-ups outgrew when they left high school. It infuriated her.

"I don't *have* any dolls!" she snapped back at him, forgetting in her anger that this was a dangerous man to push. But Darla must have sensed what was building between them, because she reached for the little pile of bills on the table and handed a few to Sarah.

"Get some food, huh," she said hopefully, trying to get rid of her before there was trouble. But Sarah was too mad by this time, and with all she'd been through so far tonight, she was getting reckless.

"Somebody already bought me dinner..." she said sullenly, taking the money, but rejecting Darla's offer. Then she challenged Funboy directly, "... the *police!*" she spat at him, letting him know that she still had *some* protectors left in this world.

But after a few seconds, his impatient glare unnerved her, so she snatched up the money and retreated, hating him, and herself for giving in so easily.

"'Somebody already bought me dinner... the *police*'," he mocked cruelly as she walked stiff-backed away from them, her mother's foolish giggle at his jibe stabbing her like a knife.

I hate them, Sarah thought, fighting back her tears. *Shelly... Eric... why did you have to die?*

But there was no answer... there would *never* be an answer to that question.

> In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent.
>
> **— Isaiah 27:1**

[This one has what you seek.]

Eric stood before the steel grating of Gideon's Pawnshop, staring through the dirty glass at the dirty little man counting his dirty money in the back of the dirty shop.

"Hey! Piss off! We're closed! *Cerrado*!" The vicious little man bellowed inside the shop when Eric pounded loudly on the padlocked gate. "Go sleep it off somewhere else, dusthead... unless you wanna get mutilated."

Then Eric wrenched open the gate as if the lock were made of paper, and through the smeared glass he could see Gideon pull out his gun and angrily advance to challenge the intruder, muttering as he came, "Goddamn creatures of the night — they never learn."

Eric ignored Gideon's warnings and tapped three slow, sepulchral knocks on the glass of the door; then, even as the dangerous little man warily approached, bold with the gun he carried, Eric smashed the glass, shattering it in an explosion of sound, and stepped casually through. Out of the night, the crow skimmed past, buffeting the startled little man off of his feet and sending the pistol skidding across the floor.

"... Suddenly I heard a tapping,

As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door." Eric quoted sardonically, casually brushing broken glass off of his shoulder.

"What're you talking about?" Gideon gasped from the floor, his fat face with its ridiculous moustache — like an anaemic caterpillar crawling across his upper lip — sweaty with fear.

"You heard me rapping, right?" Eric said, raising his eyebrows quizzically as he slowly advanced into the shop.

"You're trespassing," Gideon blustered, realising that his intruder was weaponless. "And you owe me a fuckin' new door."

"I'm looking for something in an engagement ring... gold," Eric said, ignoring him and sounding for all the world like a genuine customer. Then he lowered his head and spread his empty hands into a wide, cruciform stance, offering no threat. But Gideon scarcely even heard him — his scrambling hands had found his pistol and he raised it, taking trembling aim.

"You're looking for a coroner, shit-for-brains," he gasped, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet slammed into Eric full in the chest, right over his heart, and exited his back in an explosive mist of blood, the force of it driving him backwards, while a flash of white-hot agony lanced through him.

He had felt this before!

But this time... it was different. He stood in shock, looking down at his chest while the bullet hole shrank and healed itself in seconds, leaving only a charred hole in his tunic and the fading memory of a fleeting pain. He lifted his head, a grin of wolfish glee pulling his black-painted lips apart — a thin drool of saliva dripping off his lower lip was the only sign that he'd been affected by the bullet — and he laughed again with a dark, mad joy at this new evidence of his invulnerability.

In utter horror, Gideon stared at him, gasping like a dying fish. "Shit on me shit on me *shit on me...*" he shrieked, scuttling like the cockroach he was for the safety of his back counter and the weapons hidden there. But Eric caught him before he'd gone inches and threw him completely across the room... to land behind that same counter. Hearing Eric's feet behind him, Gideon fumbled for a weapon, but he wasn't quick enough. Eric

leapt onto the counter, then high into the air as Gideon came up swinging a bat across the empty space that Eric had occupied an instant before.

Confusion blanked the little man's fat face as he searched for the intruder, then stark terror when Eric swung past him, his painted face upside down and on a level with his own, like a child playing games on the monkey bars... except, this was no game.

"Mr. Gideon. You're not paying attention," the upside-down face said, as Eric ripped the bat from his hands and slammed it viciously against his head. But the slimy little shopkeeper wasn't stopped that easily.

Eric swung down and dropped to crouch on the counter before him like an attacking panther, and Gideon swung his arm to backhand Eric's face with a blow that would have broken his nose... if it had connected. But Eric caught his wrist and stopped it cold, as effortlessly as he would have caught a thrown ball. Then he smashed the glass countertop in front of Gideon, reached through to snatch up one of the knives on display, and slammed it right through Gideon's hand, pinning him to the counter as he'd pinned Tin Tin to the stack of pallets. Gideon screamed in horrified disbelief.

"I repeat, a gold engagement ring, yes?" Eric reminded him implacably, muffling his yells of pain with a pitiless hand. "It was pawned here a year ago by a customer of yours named Tin Tin." Suddenly he leaped off of the counter, leaving Gideon trapped by the knife through his hand. "He confided in me before he ran out of breath," Eric snarled, swinging around to stare back at Gideon with an expression of such savagery that the shopkeeper recoiled in stark terror.

Albrecht stood in the midst of the small cluster of official vehicles which had gathered in this noisome alley, and watched Detective Torres stare sourly at the body being carried past

them into the waiting ambulance. It had five knives sticking out of its chest and was overpoweringly dead.

"Who's this sack of shit?" Torres snapped in disgust.

"That's Tin Tin, one of T-bird's little helpers. I think you can rule out 'accidental death'," Albrecht smirked, with no little satisfaction. He remembered another October night, and another man who had died with five wounds in his chest. And without a shred of proof, he knew that this dead man on the stretcher had been in that loft the night Shelly Webster and Eric Draven had been killed.

"Don't any of your street demons have real grown-up names?" the detective asked with surly amusement, but Albrecht went on, ignoring him.

"This *could* be a turf hit, but it doesn't look like your usual gang crap." In fact, the whole thing had him puzzled.

"C'mon, Albrecht, spare me. You're a beat cop now, so *be* a beat cop," the detective snapped, hating the other man, whose honesty couldn't be subverted, whose decency couldn't be bullied.

"I'm supposed to thank you for that, right?" Albrecht said bitterly, stung by the taunt. Torres' smirk gave him all the answer he needed.

"A word to the wise — watch your fuckin' mouth!" Torres sneered, knowing — as all bullies knew — when his words would hurt the most. Then his face went stiff in shocked disgust as he caught his first glimpse of the alley wall behind Albrecht. "What the hell do you call that?"

Almost casually, knowing what he would see, Albrecht turned, letting his eyes travel across the outline of a giant bird which spanned over twenty feet. "I call it blood, detective," he drawled, repaying the taunt with one of his own. "I suppose you'll write it up as... *graffiti*."

"You can leave my crime scene now, okay," Torres muttered, shaken by the sight, but determined to have the last word. But Albrecht just smiled to himself — Tin Tin a corpse *and* Torres looking sick, and both on the same night... things were definitely starting to look up.

I have felt the wind of the wing of madness pass over me.

— Charles Beaudelaire

Eric raged through the pawnshop. His mood had changed from bitter scorn to something much deadlier. "Warmer?" he shouted, his tone more threat than question.

"What're you doing," Gideon wailed, still pinned to the counter.

"Don't you *know* this game," Eric asked harshly, leaving a trail of destruction behind him.

"What game you talking about?" Gideon shrieked, gaping at the knife sticking out of his hand. "Okay, the rings, I'll tell you about the rings. They're in the metal box, under the shelf there. Get your fucking rings, you can chew on 'em and choke on 'em, you sonuvabitch..." But he was choking himself, in helpless rage and pain.

Behind another counter, Eric found the metal box, and suddenly he went very still. With an easy grace he crossed his legs and sank bonelessly to the floor, opening the box with trembling hands.

> *"Look, it goes up to the attic," he said, barely repressing the laughter that bubbled out of him. Shelly looked down doubtfully from her perch on the ladder, then smiled back at him when she saw his expression. She could tell there was something wonderful up there... and there was, even more wonderful than she could ever guess...*

Again memory's acid fingers scorched his mind, and he saw the candlelit attic room where he'd proposed to Shelly, where he'd given her *this* ring. It didn't belong here, in this shop of so many sorrows.

But there were dozens of rings... hundreds. *How can I ever find Shelly's ring in here*? he thought in dismay, still wincing from

the memory he'd just relived. But he couldn't leave it in Gideon's hands. What if it had already been sold?

He reached into the little box and drew out one of the rings, staring at it in the dim light. "No," he said bleakly, tossing it impatiently away to land with a jingle on the floor beside him. The next one he didn't even need to look at, eyes were no longer necessary — Shelly's ring would sing to him with her essence the instant he touched it. "No. No. No," he repeated, sensing the anonymous pain each one carried, searching through nettles to grasp the sharpest thorn.

Suddenly he sucked in his breath with a hiss of purest agony, and opened his eyes upon the delicate ring between his fingers. "Shelly!" Her name was torn from his throat as the memories clinging to the golden circlet swarmed into his consciousness like a million merciless wasps — the secret attic room lit with a hundred candles, the offering of the little velvet box, Shelly's joyous acceptance and all the sweet memories that followed...

> *He'd worked out a beautiful speech, but when the time came, all he could do was grin like a tongue-tied ten-year-old giving his girl a valentine. In the end, that was all he needed — the magic of the candlelight and the delicately beautiful ring said everything that he needed to say, and the look on Shelly's face told him everything he needed to hear...*
>
> *"Mine," he breathed through her ecstatic embrace, at last daring to use the word. "Mine forever."*
>
> *"Only forever?" she whispered back, her love consuming him like a flame.*
>
> *"Forever... and ever!" he said solemnly, and it was the truest thing he'd ever said in his life...*

With a gesture of aching tenderness, he slipped the ring onto his little finger and touched it briefly to his lips. Then the iron mask of his purpose clamped down on his mind again and he roared through the shop like a primal force of nature, taking what he needed and leaving ruin in his wake.

> My fury shall be poured out upon this place... and it shall burn, and shall not be quenched.
>
> **— Jeremiah 7:20**

Gideon had finally managed to get enough nerve to wrench the knife out of his hand and was fumbling to find a weapon when Eric loomed up out of the shadows again, with a sawed-off shotgun as long as his forearm pointed right at the fat ugly face. From behind him drifted the eye-burning fumes of spilled gasoline.

"You have one chance to live," Eric said ominously.

Gideon was a broken man, wrapping his bleeding hand in a filthy rag, cowering behind the counter, and staring down the barrel of the gun in Eric's hand. He still didn't have a clue why this man was here or what he wanted — all he knew was that Eric wasn't like any thief he'd ever run into before.

"Look, man," he whimpered, confused and desperate. "Take anything you want."

"Thank you," Eric said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"Take anything!" Gideon screamed, watching in horror while Eric poured gasoline all over the counters around him.

Tossing the empty can aside, Eric impaled Gideon with his burning gaze. "Now you're going to tell me where to find the rest of Tin Tin's little party pals."

Gideon blanched and babbled the information as fast as his tongue could spit it out. "They all hang out at The Pit. All of T-bird's little potato-heads hang out there. Funboy — he lives there, upstairs... alright?"

"Funboy..." Eric murmured, bracing his soul against the images of that vacuous face leering over Shelly. "A whole jolly club," he cried, his voice harsh as he fought to control his fury, smashing counter after counter in a violent punctuation to his words. "With jolly pirate nicknames!

"Hold still!" he snarled at Gideon, rage so mixed with pain by now that he could hardly breathe. He held up one of the rings

from the box, absorbing its bitter message of misery, layering it on top of his own. "Each one of these is a life..." one by one he threw them at the flinching, whimpering little man, as implacable as Nemesis, "...a life you helped destroy!"

"I beg you... don't kill me."

"I'm not going to kill you," Eric promised grimly. "Your job will be to tell the rest of them that Death is coming for them... tonight!" His eyes burned inside their painted shadows as he tipped the rest of the pitiful hoard of rings down the barrel of the shotgun.

"Tell them *Eric Draven* sends his regards," he said with quiet menace, then turned and strolled almost casually through the havoc he had wreaked, pausing only to pick up an electric guitar as he passed.

"Walk outta here, they're gonna erase your sorry ass," Gideon screamed frantically, still blustering in spite of all that had happened. "You're nothin' but street grease, y'hear? Street grease, you motherfucker!"

But Eric only paused in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder with an arch expression of feigned curiosity on his face. "Is that *gasoline* I smell?" he asked rhetorically as his lips curled into a cruel smile. Gideon shrieked like a trapped rat, and fled the promise in Eric's words, while Eric stepped out of the pawnshop, held the ugly weapon at arms' length and fired its pathetic, jewelled shrapnel into the fume-laden interior.

With an eerie, satisfying beauty, flame mushroomed from every door and window with a roar that broke windows for a block around. For a few brief seconds, a new sun lit the skies, enveloping Eric in its corona, melting the glass in the windows, yet leaving him as unharmed as if he'd been caressed by a summer breeze.

All love, all liking, all delight
Lies drowned with us in endless night.

— Robert Herrick

Les the bartender had seen the whole business with Darla and Funboy, of course, but he was busy with another customer down the counter, so Sarah had a few minutes to pull herself together before he came over to her. He was a gruff and ugly man, but there was more real kindness in his face than in Darla's entire body, and Sarah was glad to count him as one of her friends; although, considering where he worked, she didn't get to see him very often.

"Root beer," she told him morosely, not wanting to brave the rainy night just yet. She pushed one of Darla's bills towards him.

"It's on the house, kiddo, you know that," he said with his usual gruff kindness, pushing her money back at her as he set her drink down, "one root beer." Then his eye was attracted by something behind her, and she swivelled in her seat to see what it was. It was Darla and Funboy — they'd left the little table and were starting up the stairs to Funboy's room, Darla a little ahead, looking back flirtatiously at the man who was already fondling her lewdly.

Sarah turned back to face Les, hunching her shoulders in a hot, shamed misery at what they were doing... and were going to do.

"I can't *do* anything," Les said in pained embarrassment and sympathy. "Your mom? Technically, she's... off, right now," he explained, as if that would do any good.

"Yeah. *Way* off," Sarah said bitterly, adding to herself — *I wish she* was*... on another planet*! Slowly she sipped her root beer, its sweetness growing flat as depression washed over her. Funboy was an asshole, a jerk, a rat-bastard, mother-fucking... oh shit, what a stupid, *stupid* pun.

"Look, kiddo, you watch your step around Funboy — you push that sonuvabitch too far and you could wind up in big trouble," Les went on, looking at her with genuine concern, but he wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know.

"Yeah, I know," she sighed heavily, afraid that she had no real way of avoiding her mother's boyfriend... or whatever plans he might have for her future.

Role models. Shelly had told her to look for good people to study as role models, but Shelly had been the only one she'd known... until Eric came into their lives. Then Sarah began studying him for all she was worth.

Shelly had laughed and said she was like Jane Goodall studying chimpanzees in Africa, and Eric got a big kick out of that, bouncing all around the loft, pretending to be a chimp. They'd all laughed until they cried and their sides hurt. Ever after that, whenever Eric wanted to tease her, he'd call her "Sarah Jane" and go "Ook, ook," crouching and swinging his arms like a monkey. It never failed to crack them both up.

Damn! He'd been such a *great* guy!

But if Eric was a positive role model, then Funboy was a *negative* one, and she'd better study him too, so she'd never, never, *never* have anything to do with any creep the least little bit like him, and so she'd never make the same stupid mistakes her mother did.

Finally she couldn't stand even being in the same building as Funboy and her mother, knowing what they were doing upstairs. Not after remembering those happy times with Shelly and Eric. Well, at least they were doing it here and not back at the apartment. Rain or no rain, she went back out into the night.

Eric was so bemused by what he had learned... and what he had done...that he didn't even notice the police car come screeching to a halt in front of him or the policeman who got out of it and

pointed a gun at him, until he heard the nervous shout, "Police! Don't move. I said: *Don't! Move!"*

Eric smiled benignly at the officer as a strange sense of recognition washed over him. He read the name-badge on his pocket — Albrecht. Somehow he knew this man.

"I thought the police always said 'freeze'," Eric said with quiet curiosity, pausing and offering no threat.

"Well, I *am* the police, and I say: don't move, Snow White. You move, you're dead." Albrecht watched him with a wary eye, terribly unsure of his ground with this compelling stranger who walked unscathed through fire.

"And *I* say I'm dead... *and I move*," Eric countered, raising his hands submissively and walking slowly forward. But the irony of the words could not mask the sadness in his voice.

"Not one more step... I'm serious!"

Eric finally stopped and looked quizzically at the nervous policeman. "Then shoot me, if you will," he bowed in gentle mockery, "Officer Albrecht." Tilting his head, he stared up at the bewildered policeman with a look that was not quite sane.

"What are you, nuts? Walking into a gun?" Albrecht gasped, relieved that the weirdo had finally stopped. "You high?"

"You don't remember me," Eric said, not really surprised.

"What are you talking about?"

"How about Shelly? Do you remember Shelly Webster?" All mockery had fled from his voice, burned away by the now too familiar pain of memory.

"Shelly Webster's dead, my friend," Albrecht said, wrestling painful memories of his own. "I want you to move over to the curb there. C'mon, real nice and easy. C'mon, *move* it!" Finally Eric obeyed, stepping back to the curb and sitting down obediently. "I'm waiting for backup. It's getting too friggin' weird for me."

"Oh, it gets better," Eric said, the wolfish look returning to his face. "Do you know someone named T-bird? He had a friend who

shouldn't have played with knives. Like the coat?" he asked, baring his teeth in a feral smile as he lifted the lapel.

"You're the guy that murdered Tin Tin," Albrecht gasped, torn between dismay and approval, then his face softened in compassion when he saw the pain sear the painted face before him.

"He was already dead. He died a year ago... the moment he touched her." Eric's expression froze as he stared into his own bleak nightmares, "They're *all* dead... they just don't know it yet." And he lifted his wide, mad eyes to stare at the bewildered policeman.

Shouts of looters from the burning pawnshop caught Albrecht's attention then, before he could respond to Eric's unnerving words, and for a fleeting instant he took his eyes off of him to shout at them. When he looked back, Eric was gone. There was no one left with him in the empty street except a pair of looters disappearing into distant shadows, no sound except the roaring surge of the fire destroying Gideon's and a fading cackle of laughter from the triumphant looters.

"Oh great. Great!" he berated himself. "A guy shows up looking like a mime from hell and you lose him right out in the open." He looked up and down the street in frustrated disgust. "Well, at least he didn't do that 'walking against the wind' shit. I hate that," he sighed as the first of his backup arrived. How the hell was he going to explain *this*?

Often an entire city has suffered because of an evil man.

— Hesiod

The eyes were at the end of their usefulness. They never lasted long — once out of the body, their potency faded after just a few days. But there was always one last function they could

perform, and Myca tended to it with delicate care. Smoke rose from the brazier and swirled intoxicatingly around her as she lounged on Top Dollar's boardroom table next to it. Carefully she sprinkled the sizzling pan with her own exotic blend of potent crystals and herbs, extracting the last essences of the eye within that perfumed, narcotic smoke. She breathed deeply of the fumes, absorbing their power, reaching for the disturbing visions they opened for her, and watched her brother pace across the room.

"You are very restless."

"Just wish I was a little hungry again, that's all," he said, his voice heavy with discontent — not even anticipating Devil's Night gave him the pleasure he craved.

"Be careful of what you ask for..." his sister warned,

"Yeah, I may get it. I know," he sighed, taking her warning seriously, as he did everything she told him — she was, after all, his ultimate source of information, the linchpin of his organisational machine. He sat down next to her and the brazier, taking a deep breath of the heady smoke, letting his sister's alchemies work their magic on him.

"There are energies aligning against you," she said, thinking of what she'd seen in the smoke.

"Seein' is believin', isn't it?" he mocked her teasingly, still confident of his own strength, and let her kiss him, tasting of her own alchemies. Ah, Myca fed his hunger... she *was* his hunger, and he needed no other. He touched his little finger to his tongue and then to the mound of white powder in front of him. Smiling sensuously at his sister, he licked the cocaine like a naughty boy stealing sugar. "Mmm... yummy," he teased, letting the tiny tingle blend with the powerful surge he got from her visionary smoke.

She flowed down from the table top then, to perch provocatively on his chair arm, brushing her breasts lingeringly against his shoulder while she loosely gathered his long hair, letting it spill in a silken fall through her fingers. He dropped one hand to her leg to steady her against him, caressing the firm, silk-clad flesh of her inner thigh — her body intoxicated him more than her own sorcerous chemistries.

Then his pleasures were disturbed as Grange entered with T-bird trailing behind like a well-trained killer dog. Grange's first words sent a cold wave of anger through him, erasing all his feelings of satisfaction.

"Gideon's pawnshop just burned down... to the foundation," he said, delivering the bad news impassively.

"Nobody cleared this little event with me," Top Dollar observed sourly, beginning to cut a line of cocaine. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

"I didn't have nothin' to do with that," T-bird hastened to assure him. As if he would — T-bird was too obedient a hound to slip his leash like that, but he was probably jealous of whoever *had* done it.

"Ah, sure," Top Dollar drawled scornfully, "you must be awful disappointed."

But T-bird didn't care about that. It seemed he had other things on his mind. "I got trouble," he intoned ominously. "One of my crew got himself perished."

"Yeah? And who might that be?"

"Tin Tin," he returned, with a morose expression. "Somebody stuck his blades in all his major organs in alphabetical order."

Tin Tin? Oh yeah — good with knives... he liked that in a man. "Well, gentlemen," he sneered, "by all means, I think we oughtta have an introspective moment of silence for poor old Tin Tin." He snorted the line of coke he'd been readying — as good a eulogy as any — then looked speculatively at T-bird, "You're workin' for me tomorrow night, right?"

"Whatever you say, I can do," he answered gloomily, a loyal soldier to the end.

"Good, that's very reassuring," Top Dollar said, with some irony, then thought about the implications of what they'd told him. "I still ain't heard the story on why Gideon's burned down. Is that a natural catastrophe, or act of God or something?" He raked them with his irritated gaze. "Call it my 'need-to-know'."

They left him then, alone with Myca again, and he snorted another line, remembering his own words:

It begins tonight...

> For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.
>
> **— Psalms 91:11-13**

Climbing the steps onto the sidewalk, Sarah sighed in defeat. It was still raining, she was cold and wet, and there was nothing but an empty apartment waiting for her. Tomorrow was Devil's Night and she was going to be all alone for it... again. Maybe somebody would blow up their building and she just wouldn't bother to escape.

Sure, why not? she thought, climbing onto her skateboard and pushing off into the street. *What do I have to live for anyway?*

Then, without warning, the lights of a cab that she hadn't seen... or maybe she *had* seen it and didn't give a damn... loomed up out of the darkness only a couple of yards away! Too close, too close!

Suddenly a pair of strong arms wrapped around her, lifting and snatching her out of the car's path so superhumanly quickly that her feet almost bounced off of its side, and her skateboard shot between its wheels. Sheer claustrophobic panic struck her for an instant as she was blasted with the backwash of the car's passing and its reeking exhaust, and she struggled uselessly against the relentless grasp that had lifted her as effortlessly as if she were a baby.

"Let me go, you creep!" she yelled, fear making her abusive, but when her unknown rescuer promptly set her down safely on the sidewalk, she was overcome by embarrassment at her reaction. Ashamed of her fear and of the shitty way she'd treated the stranger who'd just saved her life, she did the first thing

which came into her mind — which was to abuse the departing cabdriver who'd come so close to flattening her.

"You didn't even slow down, dickhead!" she shouted at the retreating taillights, and didn't see how her rescuer winced away from her in painful recognition, or how he cupped his hand to his face to hide it from her, turning away and reaching blindly for the support of a telephone pole, his eyes blurring with sudden tears.

"He couldn't have stopped," he said quietly, his voice tight with emotion, as he turned his face away from her and leaned wearily against the pole.

"He was a buttface! *I* coulda made it," Sarah said stoutly, but it was a false bravado — she knew she would've been killed if this stranger hadn't acted so quickly. He'd saved her, and then he'd let her go, giving her plenty of space when she'd yelled at him. He probably was a really nice guy, and all she'd done so far was holler at him. Well, she wasn't going to apologise — she had a *right* to get upset, and she didn't owe this guy anything. *Except your life*, her conscience nagged at her.

Well then, I can be friendly, I guess. She stepped closer to him, wondering why he wouldn't look at her. And why was he leaning up against that pole like that? Had he hurt himself rescuing her? She saw that he carried an electric guitar slung across his back, and the sight of it awoke painful memories — Eric had played a guitar like that, sitting cross-legged in Shelly's loft, composing songs for his band. Then she saw the white makeup on his face, half hidden behind the tangled tendrils of his wet hair — he was wetter than she was.

"What're you supposed to be, a clown or something?" she asked curiously, just to let him know that she didn't spend all her time hollering, and while it wasn't exactly a thank-you, it kind of opened the door if he wanted to talk.

"Sometimes," he said, in such a sad voice that she knew she wasn't going to get any more out of him. In her experience, when grown-ups were that unhappy, they were scary to be around.

Still, she owed him *some* kind of acknowledgement for helping her, even if it was nothing more than a moment's friendliness. But what could she say? *Thanks for saving my life*? No, that was too... personal. She was more comfortable avoiding the subject altogether.

"It's more like surfing than skating," she said conversationally, going across the now-quiet street to retrieve her skateboard from the far curb where it had landed. It still wasn't much of a thank-you, but she didn't want to just skate off without saying *something*. Besides... there was something hauntingly familiar about the face behind all that white paint.

She sighed, looking at all the cold wet pavement ahead of her. "I wish the rain would stop, just once," she said bitterly, letting a little of her own unhappiness show, as if in response to the stranger's mood.

"It can't rain *all* the time," he said, in such a wistful, yearning voice that it almost broke her heart... until she was stunned by recognition. She knew those words! And she knew that voice!

"*Eric?*" she cried in hope and disbelief, spinning around to look at where he'd been standing.

But he was gone... although less than a second had passed between his words and her remembrance of them. He had vanished into thin air more quickly than humanly possible.

Eric was *dead*! So who... or *what*... had she seen?

Sarah! Sarah... Shelly's little "stray kitten".

How the very touch of her had burned his mind. He'd acted without thought when he saw her step into the path of the onrushing taxi, but harsh words had echoed through his mind: *[You must not turn aside for the living.]* And then... the memories, oh God, the memories...

> *... "Ta-dum!" Shelly crowed proudly, holding up her wedding dress — they'd finally stitched the last bit of lace into place, and it was perfect. They'd been working on it together for days and she was thrilled Shelly had let her help...*
>
> Whump! *The pillow caught her in the face, giving her a mouthful of fuzzy nap and almost making her choke on her own laughter. "Ooooh, I'll get you for that," she giggled, bouncing across the bed after a nearly hysterical Shelly, while Eric watched in delight, laughing so hard he had to hold his sides. Then Shelly grabbed him and they all three rolled on the bed, whooping like a trio of maniacs...*

They left him strangely weak and shaken, as if the simple act of lifting a child to safety had drained all the strength out of him. And to see her like that: so alone and unhappy, so defensive... and defenceless... had hurt worse than Tin Tin's knives or Gideon's gun. Her loss had been as great as his own.

[Go now. You did not come here to help the living.]

He'd heard those words before... a million years... a few hours ago? What did they mean? But he left, as commanded, sensing the *rightness* in those words, even as every compassionate bone in his body protested the *wrongness* of abandoning Sarah yet again.

He left her, between one heartbeat and the next, left her alone in the rain-wet street... and the sound of his name on her lips stilled the very breath in his lungs.

His shift had ended an hour ago, but Albrecht was on the trail of a memory — a nagging, impossible memory. Of a man six times dead who'd walked through flames, bowed to him in front of a burning building and spoke of death as one who knew it intimately. God, talk about *overkill*, he thought, remembering the autopsy report — stab wound, four bullet wounds and a six-story fall — any *one* of which would've killed him outright! And yet... who had he seen tonight? Maybe there was a twin brother...

"Don't thank me." He looked up to see Annie Coopersmith bringing the file he had begged her to "borrow". A smile lit her pretty, dark features. "Are we fighting the good fight?"

He took the file and began looking through its too-familiar contents with a heavy heart. "Double homicide, a year ago. No convictions. Annie, look at that." He handed her a copy of the petition that had started it all.

"'We the undersigned tenants of 1929 Calderon Court Apartments...'" she began reading. "What is this, a petition?"

He sighed — anywhere else in the city, that's all it would've been, but for Shelly... "A big 'kick-me' sign for a very nice girl who found herself a cause... that cause that got her killed."

Annie was shocked — even *she* knew better, and she didn't live in the district. "She was fighting tenant eviction in *that* neighbourhood?"

"Shelly Webster and her nice rock-and-roll boyfriend, Eric Draven," he explained, spreading the publicity photos of Hangman's Joke across his desk and studying them intently.

"You know, the last time you went snooping around on a case is when you got put back on the beat," she warned him, half teasing, half serious. The "fix was in" in this precinct, and Albrecht had been slapped down more than once for going against it. She didn't know that *this* was the case that had gotten him demoted.

"Yeah, I know. Torres keeps *reminding* me."

"Oho, I *bet* he does," she laughed. But Albrecht dismissed the detective from his mind as he stared at Eric's photo, then he took a pen and began to draw a harlequin mask onto the face. Annie looked over his shoulder. *Uh oh, tampering with evidence*, she thought. "You're gonna wind up working a school crosswalk," she quipped, wondering what he was up to.

"I'm cool," he said distractedly, hardly daring to believe his eyes.

Annie gave up on him — he'd learned the hard way to keep his mouth shut, and she didn't really want to know more than she already did — then she wouldn't have to lie to cover for him. "You didn't get that file from me, okay?" she said, walking away. "*Don't* tell me you 'owe me one'."

"Um... I owe you one," he called back to her, and meant it too, but she wasn't impressed.

"Yeah, right," she laughed, shaking her head. He was the best cop in the place, and because of that, Torres treated him like shit. No, *she* owed him, and more than one... and she'd probably keep on helping him until it got *her* busted.

Back at his desk, Albrecht remembered how his mystery man had spoken of T-bird. Yeah, T-bird and his crew — whom he'd moved to the *top* of his short-list of suspects in the Draven-Webster murders. He stared at Eric's ink-altered face laughing eerily up at him. Eric Draven was dead... Damn! He'd even seen his ghost — a properly spectral and transparent ghost — outside the loft a year ago... and he hadn't been the only one — one of the reasons the building had cleared out so fast, and had remained empty and unvandalised since then, was because too many other people had seen the same thing he had.

The man he'd seen outside of Gideon's had been no ghost, he'd been solid flesh and blood. But Eric Draven had no brothers, twin or otherwise. So who...? "Damn," he muttered, not willing to finish the thought.

> Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps.... To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence... for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.
>
> **— Deuteronomy 32:33,35**

The sound of the music was ugly and pounding, making the very air throb around him. The crow wheeled through the air and came to land on Eric's shoulder where he sat perched beside a neon sign that read "Hotel" in blinking lights — the latest station on this pilgrimage of death. With a dark flutter of wings it flew to an open window sill and watched two people lying half-naked on a bed. They were Funboy and Darla.

"Tomorrow night, we can get high, and watch this whole fuckin' city burn, from that window," Funboy giggled, thrusting a morphine-laden needle into Darla's veins. From the sound of his slurred voice, he was already high. Outside, Eric listened grimly, his perception filtered through the eyes of the crow.

Then the bird flew into the room and landed on the television, sending images of the two on the bed back to Eric. The blast of noise from the boombox ruffled its feathers and it gave an indignant squawk. Darla lifted her eyes at the unexpected sound.

"There's a big fuckin' bird over there," she giggled, peering over Funboy's head while he slobbered wet kisses across her neck.

He was on a serious nod, all his reason seduced by the poisonous fumes of the drug in his veins, barely able to slew his head around to look at the crow gravely watching him. "Its a squab!" he shouted, beginning to laugh helplessly. "C'mere, bird. Hey, birdie, birdie. Here birdie, here birdiebirdiebirdie... " It was the funniest joke he'd heard all day.

Then Eric stepped through the window, the guitar he'd taken from Gideon's slung over his shoulder, and walked unnoticed into the

room. "Here, Funboy," he mocked ominously, pausing to brush his forehead against the cold light bulb dangling nakedly in the middle of the room, but it couldn't cool the fever in his blood.

"What the fuck?" Funboy said stupidly, his face going slack with surprise when he finally noticed the intruder. Then Eric raised his fist and rushed the bed with a maniacal grin, feinting an attack on Funboy in time to the music. Darla giggled stupidly as she watched Funboy scramble in panic from an attack that ended harmlessly when Eric casually turned away to hang his guitar safely on a coat-rack.

"No, man! Don't *do* that!" Funboy gasped. "You nearly gave me a fuckin' heart attack." He fumbled for his gun on the nightstand and pointed it angrily at Eric's back. "'S time for you to get your bird and leave, freako."

But bullets were no more of a threat to Eric than spitballs by now, and all he did was drag up a chair and straddle it, grinning at Funboy, his teeth flashing against his black-painted lips. Then he lifted his right hand and placed it flat against the muzzle of the gun, and taunted, "Take your shot, Funboy. You got me, dead bang." For a long moment the three of them were immobile — Eric waiting patiently, with a look of madness in his eyes, Funboy and Darla frozen in amazement — while the pulsing lights from the boombox reflected hypnotically off of the gleaming metal of the gun barrel.

Shaken out of his stupor, Funboy gaped at him in astonishment, then giggled. "You are seriously fucked up. Did you look in a mirror?... You need professional help," he crowed, delighted that Eric had offered himself so willingly.

Darla jumped when Funboy pulled the trigger, sending a bullet ripping through Eric's palm and splattering all three of them with his blood. The first sharp pain wrung a cry from him as he staggered back and spun away, but it was gone in an instant, and he smirked to himself as he continued to cry out in pretended agony. Behind him, Funboy leapt to his feet and bounced up and down on the bed, cheering like a triumphant teenager: "Bingo! Hah, he shoots! He scores!"

But his glee faded when Eric turned, holding up his bloody hand, not crying out in pain but laughing and whooping in imitation of Funboy's own cheers. With a demented playfulness he peered at them through the ragged hole, then howled in triumph when it closed and healed even as they watched.

Funboy could only stare in horror and gasp, "Je-sus Chr-ist!"

But, like Gabriel with a mouse, Eric hadn't finished toying with his prey. "Jesus Christ... stop me if you've heard this one..." he began conversationally, sounding like everyone who'd ever told a bad joke, dazzling them with his change of mood. Lifting his arms and spreading them wide, he stood completely vulnerable before Funboy, as Darla, horror blurring her blood-splattered face, began edging away from them.

"... Jesus Christ walks into a hotel..." Funboy couldn't figure out what he was playing at, but he had one answer for anything that confused him and he used it again, shooting Eric in the shoulder, staggering him back a few paces. But Eric only glanced at the wound as it vanished and dismissed it with a mocking "Ow." Then, with his hands clasped behind him and a deranged dancing/seesaw gait, he half walked, half skipped towards Funboy.

"... He hands the innkeeper three nails. He asks..." Another bullet slammed into him, in the stomach this time, doubling him over, driving him back a few feet.

"Don't you ever fuckin' *die*?" Funboy screamed hoarsely, panting with terror as he stood on the shaking bed, never realising that Eric had already died at his hands... one year earlier.

Eric ignored him as he finished the bitterly ironic "joke" he was telling. "...'Can you put me up for the night?'"

Then, as Funboy raised the gun again, Eric backhanded his arm with brutal impatience, so that the next bullet ripped through Funboy's own leg, and he shrieked in agony as he collapsed back onto the bed. "Does that hurt?" Eric asked solicitously, as he leapt agilely to squat next to the writhing man, and regarded him with cold, humourless eyes. The time for joking had ended.

"*Fuck!* Does it... fuck, does it hurt?" Funboy groaned, as Darla darted to the bathroom and locked herself in, lost in a mindless panic.

Shock and terror and the venomous drugs still in his veins had ripped all coherent thought from Funboy's brain as he clutched his blood-soaked leg and stared with horrified despair at the shredded flesh. "Oh God. Look what you've done to my *sheets*," he wailed inanely as he fell out of consciousness.

Eric stepped off of the bed then, and tossed Funboy's gun aside. Once, he dimly remembered, carnage like this would have sickened him, and he would have scorned to bully and toy with anyone like this. But now, as he grabbed Funboy by the ankle of his wounded leg and dragged him across the floor to the bathroom, all he could hold in his mind were Shelly's last agonised memories of this man raping her — the demons of remembrance had driven him far beyond the gentle, compassionate man he had once been, and they left no room for pity or mercy... no room for anything but the terrible need to punish these animals for what they had done to her...

> *"Got a gun in my pocket! You're happy to see me, aren't you," the blond one laughed eagerly, his leering face looming over her while the little dark one pinned her down and stifled her screams. "You wanna see what I got?" His bare, tattooed chest writhed obscenely before her as he wriggled out of his pants. She squeezed her eyes shut in horror at what was to come...*

Inflamed by the flashing vision, Eric burst through the locked door of the bathroom without a pause and glanced around the filthy, squalid little room. His gaze skimmed over Darla cowering in the corner, but all his focus was on Funboy as he dragged his prostrate body over to the rusted tub and dumped him into it, turning on the shower so that the cold water would awaken him — a quiet death while he was unconscious would not satisfy the bloodlust that raged within him.

Then he turned his attention to Darla, who was sobbing as she fumbled with one of the ubiquitous straight razors, holding it before her in a feeble defence. He knew her! Old memories awoke... and newer ones, of a lonely child, lost on the uncaring streets.

[If you wish to help her, you must pay the price. Help the living, and you will bleed.]

He looked over at the crow, sitting impassively on the television, regarding him with its fathomless eyes. But he had loved the child too — Shelly's "stray kitten" — and blood was little enough to offer for love.

He crossed purposefully to Darla, ignoring her frantic protests, and batted the razor out of her hands; then he lifted her in a relentless grip, forcing her to face herself in the mirror.

"Look!" he commanded, compelling her obedience. "'Mother is the name for God on the lips and hearts of all children.' Do you understand?" At her blank look, he felt a strange power flow into him and he gripped her arms cruelly... and she gasped as a milky fluid began to drip out of the needle tracks that cratered her arms.

"Morphine is bad for you," Eric said softly when Darla relaxed in his arms, freed from the poisons in her mind. He opened his hands then, releasing her from his grasp, and stepped away to look at her with sad compassion. Then he took her head between relentless hands, burning his gaze into her eyes.

"Your daughter is out there on the streets, waiting for you." And he watched the guilty self-knowledge war with her fear of him, until she sagged in defeat. With a stunned look on her face, she sidled past him, then ran from the room like someone had just snatched her from the jaws of Hell... which maybe Eric had.

"Go, and sin no more..."

Four floors below them, bloody, battered, and nearly unrecognisable, Gideon sat drinking at the bar. He was in a foul temper... and he figured he had good reason to be.

"If I wanted ice, I woulda *asked* for ice," he snarled, wanting to lash out at somebody, *anybody*. Angrily he tossed the ice over his shoulder and slammed the glass back down on the bar. "*Now* fill it up!"

"Fill it up yourself, 'macho man'," Les, the bartender snapped, dropping the bottle in front of him. He didn't want this aggravation, not from a piece of slime like Gideon.

"I really need this," the little man muttered sourly, fumbling one-handed with the bottle, too pissed off and in too much pain to care who he alienated. Damn, he should've gone to the hospital first, but after what he'd been through, he needed a

drink more than anything else... a *lot* of drinks. Then he felt a presence behind him as he saw a manicured brown hand reach for the bottle and pour him a healthy serving of the liquor. "All right," he spat ungraciously, just wanting to be left alone, especially by *this* man.

"You burn yourself playing with matches?" a cool voice asked him, as if he didn't already know the answer.

"Fuck off," he snapped, hurting too much to play games.

"You have an appointment," Grange said brusquely, refusing to let the little man irritate him.

Gideon sneered nastily. "This is a first. Do I bow or do I curtsey," he smirked, too angry to be worried about the summons. He gestured expansively to the bartender, "Get my friend here a glass of blood." Then his words were drowned out by the crash of a falling chair as someone ran blindly across the room and out the front door. It was Darla, still only half-dressed, clutching her clothes to her chest as she ran.

"Hey! Good night... *Darla*," Les called out, his voice dripping with contempt. He didn't like Darla any better than he did Gideon — both of them were losers.

But Grange's eyes narrowed as he watched the panic-stricken woman disappear into the wet night. He knew she'd been upstairs with Funboy... and what would send her running out of there like that? Could it have anything to do with whoever had killed Tin Tin and burned down Gideon's?... or with Myca's "watcher"? Whatever it was, T-Bird's crew were probably involved up to their asses. He'd better check it out.

Jamming his hat firmly onto Gideon's injured head, and smiling as the little man jerked away from the abuse, he whispered, "You stay put. Right there." Then he began making his way cautiously up three flights of stairs — he had no intention of winding up like Tin Tin, whatever awaited him in Funboy's room.

Eric watched Darla flee the room, then all compassion left him as he turned his attention back to Funboy, who was finally regaining consciousness under the cold insistence of the shower. No more games now, no more mockery... it was time to end the farce. He turned to the collection of needles and vials of morphine lying on the dresser and picked one up with distaste, hating its deadly seductiveness, but it was just the instrument he needed to send Funboy to his final judgement.

But he'd turned his back on Funboy one time too many.

With a strangled cry, the crazed druggie attacked his unprotected back with the very razor Eric had so carelessly batted from Darla's hands. Through the tough leather of Tin Tin's coat, through the sturdy knit of his tunic, deep into Eric's own shrinking, quivering flesh, Funboy slashed like the maniac he was.

Pain exploded across Eric's back and he fell to his knees in helpless agony. *Help the living and you will bleed*, the crow had warned him, and here was the stunning proof of those words. These wounds were not healing, this pain was not fading. For too long he knelt in shock, mind and body refusing to encompass the damage done to them; and his blood flowed freely... as promised.

Funboy was in control again, the freako was his! But his leg was killing him — not even the morphine was enough to dull *that* pain. Ah, but there was a cure for that... a cure for *everything!* He grabbed the big bag of cocaine that shared the place of honour with his morphine ampoules and held it to his face, inhaling mightily and to hell with the niceties — he had business to take care of. And what a pleasure it was going to be!

Eric was still paralysed, on his knees in shock after the handful of heartbeats it took Funboy to take the coke into his lungs, still helpless and unresisting, and Funboy leapt on him like Gabriel pouncing on a mouse. He was completely berserk by now — pain and drugs having ripped to shreds what little mind he had left. Again and again he slashed at the defenceless man

before him, a burning lust for blood taking control of him as it had so many times in the past.

Eric rolled onto his wounded back, trying desperately to fend off Funboy's deadly attack, but he had nothing except his own tender flesh for a shield. The vicious blade cut him again and again until his hands and arms ran with blood and searing agony. He had never known such pain in his life... or in his afterlife.

Then I will bleed, he had said, all unknowing of the cost. He had become arrogant, careless, so confident of his supernatural abilities that he had forgotten what it was like to be vulnerable, to be hurt.

Once before he had seen this man through a red haze of pain, and once before he had died at this man's hands. Would it happen again? He struggled, but he had no strength. He fought, but he had no skill. The only thing that saved him now was the fact that Funboy was too drugged-up to be a coherent fighter — he swung and slashed without thought, hurting Eric but never making the crippling, the killing blow.

It was luck... or divine intervention... that finally gave Eric a chance. It was just another wild thrust, purely defensive, without hope beyond the instant, with but one thought — keep the blade away from his face and neck. But it sent Funboy spinning, crashing against a clutter of furniture, and the razor went flying out of his suddenly nerveless grasp.

But there was still the gun! It lay on the bed where Eric had tossed it a few moments... a lifetime... ago. He'd spurned it then, as the hateful, ugly thing it was, but Funboy had no such qualms. The gun was his chosen weapon, and *this* time he meant to pump this bleeding freako so full of lead he'd fall over from the weight alone.

Eric had only one chance before Funboy reached the gun and ended this one-sided fight with one bullet... or a dozen, it didn't matter. He twisted his pain-racked body and reached in sheer, hopeless desperation...

[Blood enough for the living.]

Strength began to trickle back to him, strength and purpose. He reached and snagged Funboy, somehow *knowing* where to press, where to lever, when to pull. Funboy fell in a swirl of dirty

blond hair, to crash heavily onto the floor, all the breath and sense knocked out of him.

The syringe that Eric had dropped was near to his fingers and he picked it up again. Funboy had lived for guns and drugs... it was only fitting that he should die by them as well.

When Grange burst into the room moments later, he almost thought it was empty... until he saw Funboy's trembling body convulsing on the floor, cast into stark shadows by a fallen lamp. Then a shadow moved in the window and he spun around... and froze in disbelief. A lithe figure dressed all in black, with a black and white painted harlequin face, crouched on the sill, held a bloody finger across black, grinning lips and winked impudently at him. Then, with an inhumanly quick movement, it disappeared.

Two seconds later Grange was at that same window, looking down at a sheer drop, an escape route that would give even a cat-burglar pause. Feeling like someone had just walked over his grave he turned back to Funboy — maybe there was enough life left in him to give him some answers. But he went completely still when he finally got a clear view of what had been done to the dying man.

Five syringes, like deadly cactus spines, bristled out of his chest, and around them traced in blood (Eric's blood, had he but known it)... the outline of a bird.

The slashes weren't healing, although the terrible flow of blood had stopped. *Blood enough*, the crow had said. Blood enough for Darla, blood enough for Sarah... and still, little enough to offer for love.

He bound his ribs and arms with lengths of black electrical tape that he'd taken with him from Funboy's apartment, closing over the gaping wounds, closing in the pain that lingered, slowly dissipating from his awareness, like fog under the morning sun. He took off Shelly's ring, choking back a sob when he saw how the blade had nicked the precious gold, and strung it on a thong around his neck.

Then he was ready to follow the crow again.

The bird flew overhead, blinking its eyes against the rain, while below it Eric ran easily along the rooftops with an eerie, primal elation, glorying in his recovered strength, shutting out the horrors of the last few hours — the pain and the blood and the price of love — and shared this brief joy of flight with the unearthly bird as they made their way through the rain-swept night. The cold air whistled into his lungs and the hot blood pulsed through his veins. He didn't know where the crow was leading him, and he didn't care — for this timeless moment he was without thought and at peace.

> No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.
>
> **— Aesop**

This time the bird led him to another open window, high on an empty wall, and he shuddered as he slipped soundlessly through it. Who would it be this time? Who would he execute in these comfortable rooms?

Comfortable? Who lived here? He slipped out of a small but tidy bedroom and into the shadows of an equally tidy living room. The

TV was on, and he could hear someone moving around in the kitchen.

Where was he? This *couldn't* be T-bird's place, and he had a feeling Skank lived in a dumpster. "... As you can see, I'm here on the corner of Twenty-seventh Street and East Washington Place, the site of last year's biggest Devil's Night conflagration. It was exactly one year ago that the building you see across the street from me was totally demolished by fire. The fire that was won by seven fire companies but lost the lives of two fire-fighters. In fact, if it weren't for the constant surveillance by the local police precincts..." the TV droned as a figure stepped suspiciously out of the kitchen, looking towards the bedroom... it was Officer Albrecht!

He was wearing just shorts and a t-shirt, with his cop hat still on; he had a beer in one hand and a sheaf of photographs in the other, which he laid on a table as he edged cautiously into the bedroom — he'd obviously sensed Eric come in, although there had been no sound — but then, he was a cop in a bad neighbourhood, he *had* to have good senses. Then, to his surprise, Eric felt a wave of playfulness sweep over him. *Playfulness*?

"*Freeze*!" he barked, taking an impish delight in making the policeman jump and drop his beer. For a minute he thought Albrecht was going to pull a gun or something, but as soon as he turned and saw Eric, he relaxed a little.

"Jesus! Don't ever *do* that, man," he gasped, holding a hand to his chest, startled but accepting his intruder with an unexpected equanimity. Curiously, Eric picked up the photograph the policeman had been studying — it was a picture of himself, he realised: one of the band's publicity photos, with his harlequin make-up inked in!

"Good likeness," Eric said admiringly. So Albrecht *had* recognised him in the street... and the fact that he'd been led here meant... what? The crow must have *some* reason.

But Albrecht was having a little trouble adjusting to his uninvited guest. He finally completed the thought that he hadn't dared to at the station, and it stunned him. "I saw your *body*, man. You... you *died*! You got *buried*!"

But that was not something Eric was ready to talk about, not even ready to *think* about. That was not what he wanted answers to. But then, he didn't want to bluntly tell Albrecht to mind

his own business either. "You still have your hat on," he pointed out dryly, avoiding the subject altogether.

He felt a sting of compassion when the policeman removed his hat and walked in a daze across the living room. Obviously, from the looks of those photos, he'd figured *something* out already, but it was going to take him a little while to get used to the idea. Eric went into the little kitchen and found another beer in the refrigerator — that might help. He took it back to Albrecht.

"Shit! Holy shit!" the officer was muttering, frightened and curious at the same time. He stared at Eric as he walked up, carrying the cold beer bottle. "Say, a-are you some kind of... of *ghost*?"

"*Boo!*" Eric teased, opening the beer and handing it to him. Then he remembered teasing Shelly the same way once, with another harlequin mask, and all playfulness fled him. He sat down heavily and looked beseechingly at Albrecht, "I don't know *what* I am," he said in despair. "I need for you to tell me what happened to us."

It was a terrible thing for anyone to have to ask, but he still didn't know what had finally happened to Shelly, after he'd gone through the window. At least Albrecht would be able to give him some answers.

But Albrecht didn't look too happy with what he was going to have to say. "Well, you took a six-story swan dive out of a window. She, uh... was beaten and raped... died at the hospital..." He faltered to a halt, his face crumpling with compassion when Eric froze, his eyes going wide as the words hit him like blows.

He thought he'd borne all he could earlier, in the loft, when he'd regained his memories. But to hear it from Albrecht like that made it all so horribly real again that he almost couldn't stand it.

He trembled in a daze, barely able to hear what Albrecht was saying. "Hey, you *asked*, man," the other said guiltily, putting a little distance between them, plainly distressed at causing Eric any more pain. "Hey, c'mon, read the file!" he said, picking it up and paging through it distractedly. "Shelly Webster... held on for thirty hours in intensive care... her body finally just gave it up. I saw it, man — I couldn't do jack for her." He was shaking as he held the file out for Eric,

wanting him to know what had happened, but hating to be the one to tell him.

Eric went over to him uncertainly, looking at the files as if they were a poisonous insect, then the crow give him a little mental nudge. Before he even knew what he was doing, he had grasped Albrecht's head in his hands...

> *He'd seen battered women before but never like this — her face was swollen into unrecognisability and her skin slashed to ribbons, the ugly lacerations swelling against the stitches. They'd operated... twice — for the skull fracture and for the internal injuries, but she was fading... fading...*
>
> *He could feel her pain, with every breath she took, with every laboured beat of her heart. They hovered uselessly, all of them, doctors, nurses, and himself — most useless of all...*
>
> *Hours of pain... hours of suffering... the mute appeal in every line of her body: "Help me. Make it stop hurting." But there was nothing he could do, nothing any of them could do...*
>
> *The angry electronic whine of the heart monitor warned them of the end, and they fought. Fought against Death with everything that twentieth-century medicine could marshal — CPR, shocks, drugs... none of it was enough. None of it could keep the tormented soul of Shelly Webster in the ruined shell of her body...*

Albrecht had been there for every minute of Shelly's suffering, and he had a *very* good memory.

Grabbing his head with a cry that ripped his already shredding mind, Eric flung himself away from Albrecht's memories. "*Don't touch me*!" he yelled hoarsely, when Albrecht reached out to steady him, the very touch of his hand sending shock waves through his consciousness. He recoiled violently, crashing blindly against the furniture all the way across the room, until he collapsed on the floor in front of a chair and huddled there, his whole body racked with ugly, choking sobs.

"Hey... you okay?" Albrecht asked helplessly, even though it was obvious that he was anything *but* okay.

"*I saw her*!" Eric sobbed, his voice raw with suffering, haunted by the memories just forced upon him. Then he grew a little quieter, looking up at Albrecht with tortured eyes, and a note of wonder came into his trembling voice. "I saw her through your eyes." Wonder, and then gratitude: "You stayed with her the whole time!"

"Yeah, well... you gotta understand something, alright?" He didn't want to take more credit than he deserved. "I was... I was hoping she'd come out of it, you know? And give me something I could work with." He took out a cigarette and lit it ruefully. "Yeah... what the hell," he murmured, depressed by the memory of his helplessness.

But Eric knew that wasn't the whole truth, knew that he'd stayed out of compassion more than anything else, knew that if he'd *really* wanted "something to work with", he would've tried to get more out of her. And yet, the sheer injustice of it all was as bitter as gall on his tongue.

Fixing Albrecht with an accusing glare, he challenged him angrily, "Why didn't you *do* something about it?"

It was an unfair question, but the policeman answered it honestly, "You think any of those people in that building — even the ones who signed the petition — would *talk* after what happened to you?" he said, defensive and guilty at the same time. "I kept asking questions and... finally got busted for sticking my nose where it wasn't wanted." In the end... he had failed, failed them, and failed himself, as helpless before the corruption in this neighbourhood as Shelly had been before the thugs who'd killed her.

For several moments the two men sat silently, each lost in his own dark thoughts. Then Eric picked up a framed photograph on the table, and looked sadly at the image of Albrecht and a quietly beautiful black woman. "This your wife?"

"Yeah. We... uh, well... not anymore," the policeman faltered, embarrassed. "We're getting a divorce," he finally admitted with a weary bitterness.

Eric looked at him with gentle sympathy, "It's funny," he mused, his voice choking a little as he spoke, "little things used to mean so much to Shelly... I used to think they were kind of trivial. Believe me," and he fixed Albrecht with a look that almost compelled him to belief, "*nothing* is trivial!"

There was a universe of meaning in his words, Albrecht knew. Nothing was trivial once everything had been stolen from you.

Eric swallowed hard as he reached over and plucked Albrecht's cigarette from his lips and took a long pull from it, then he held it up ruefully, smoke and grief hoarsening his voice, "You shouldn't smoke these — they'll *kill* you."

As a joke, it was more tragic than it was funny, Albrecht thought. As a warning — considering the source — he'd better take it seriously.

Eric stubbed out the cigarette and wearily lifted himself off of the floor. He began to move away, his shoulders bowed under the burden of too much sadness, his hands fisted under his crossed arms as if he felt a terrible chill in the comfortable room. He looked so forlorn and inconsolable that Albrecht would've wept if he weren't such a tough guy... after all, cops weren't supposed to cry... dammit!

"You gonna vanish into thin air again?" he asked nervously, not wanting him to leave, but not knowing how to make him stay.

"I thought I'd use your front door," Eric said contritely, closer to tears than Albrecht was.

"Look, man... uh," Albrecht felt helpless in the face of such sorrow. There was nothing he could say except inanities, but still he had to say something. "I'm sorry as hell for what happened to you and your girlfriend."

"Yeah," Eric said bleakly, his voice rough with regret, his dark eyes bright with unshed tears and his whole body trembling in spite of the tight grip his crossed arms maintained. Knives and bullets couldn't harm him, but here with Albrecht he was all too vulnerable... to grief.

He turned and walked silently out the door.

"Yeah," Albrecht whispered to the empty room.

> They shall die of grievous deaths; they shall not be lamented; neither shall they be buried; but they shall be as dung upon the face of the earth.
>
> **— Jeremiah 16:4**

Gideon's "appointment" was not going well... for him. He was holding his own for the moment, but too many parts of him hurt like hell... and he was scared shitless. He knew Grange was a dangerous sonuvabitch, but Top Dollar's reputation gave him cold shivers... and he didn't like the way that chink chick kept looking at him — like he was dog-shit or something. And that damn rock music from the club below — it was shaking the whole building. It made it hard to concentrate on what he was saying.

"I got stabbed! I *shot* the sonuvabitch! I watched the bullet hole close by itself! And then my business gets blown up real good!" He leered insolently at the chick, "Other than that, my day sucked."

"Yeah, I saw him too," Grange said quietly. "He had a guitar. He *winked* at me before he jumped out of a fourth-floor window like he had wings."

"He *winked* at you," Top Dollar said dryly, stalking across the room like a big jungle cat. "Tsk! *Musicians*!" Then he fixed Gideon with the kind of look that cat gives to its dinner. "What else did you see?"

But Gideon wasn't about to be intimidated... or at least, not *appear* to be intimidated. "So far I haven't heard shit about what you're gonna do about all this crap," he snarled. "I mean, what do I get? My livelihood got flushed away and went swirling..."

"You ain't lost *everything*!" Top Dollar whirled on him threateningly, and Gideon pulled back in fear. But he reacted to that threat as he did to *all* threats — he attacked.

"Yesss," he hissed, struggling to rise to his feet. "And maybe you're not such a big shot eith-..." But Grange shoved him roughly back down into the chair, wringing an anguished "Jesus!" out of him. Gideon had forgotten one important fact — the only reason his tactics of attack had worked in the past was because he was "under the dragon's wing". They weren't going to work against the dragon — Top Dollar — himself.

"Fair enough," Top Dollar ignored his bluster, then with a look of cruel anticipation, tossed him a small object. "Catch!" he said casually, walking away.

Gideon had caught the thing reflexively before its repulsively sticky texture made him drop it in disgust, but when he saw what it was, he was horrified. "Fuck!" he yelped, his own eyes bugging out as he stared at the bloody human eyeball rolling on the table in front of him. "Jesus!" he whispered, and this time it was almost a prayer.

"Say hello to the last fella who wouldn't co-operate with me," Top Dollar said ominously, and Gideon had a terrible feeling he was serious.

"What're you telling me... you're telling me this thing is *real*?" he gasped. Jesus! What kind of loony-tunes *were* these guys?

"All the power in the world resides in the eyes, fella — sometimes they're more useful than the people who bear them." Top Dollar's rough voice boomed compellingly as he went to a closed display case and pulled it open. Inside was an intricate display of swords and knives, and Gideon's pawnbroker's eye told him he was looking at a few hundred K worth of weaponry. It didn't reassure him at all to see Top Dollar select one of the swords and brandish it like he knew how to use it.

"You're directly outta your fuckin' mind, y'know that," he blustered, shock and disgust making him even less temperate than usual.

"Yeah," Top Dollar agreed dangerously. "Eyes *see*! It's one of the most important things I learned from my sister."

"Your sister!" he almost choked. "She's supposed to be your sister?" The chink chick? Now he *knew* Top Dollar was crazy. He started to laugh, not even trying to hide his contempt.

"My father's daughter... that's right." Top Dollar looked narrowly at Gideon, hiding his reaction to the insult as he walked around the table to stand close to him. "What's the matter? You don't see the resemblance?" He looked at the woman and Gideon could sense some kind of silent communication between them, and his skin crawled at the idea.

Then, with a sudden swift turn, Top Dollar had the sword point pressed against his throat! Grange's hands pushed down relentlessly on his shoulders, and even the chick, sitting on the table, got into the act by pressing his shoulder back with one elegantly shod foot.

"Now, let's take it from the top, friend? With a lot of detail. Whaddya say?" The reddish glow of Top Dollar's eyes and the cold, controlled anger in his rough voice told Gideon that he'd blustered a little too long. With real terror, he hurried to follow Top Dollar's command.

"He had a bird with him — nearly picked my face off," he rushed to get it all out. "He told me to tell T-bird that death was on its way, whatever the fuck *that* means. Draven... he said his name was Eric Draven." He eyed the sword fearfully. "Want to relax that thing now?" he grimaced, after all, he'd told them all he knew.

But Top Dollar wasn't done with him yet. "And this 'bird-man', he just *happened* to let you live, huh?" He turned away in disgust, but at least he took the sword with him. Then he looked back, "You sure you ain't makin' all of this up just to save your own ass?"

With the sword point removed from his neck, Gideon's relief turned into a careless rage. "I ain't makin' all this up," he snarled angrily, "I ain't... *twisted* like you two fucks!"

The chick took her foot off of him then, as a chill descended over the room, and Top Dollar looked at him with hooded eyes. "Alright," he said softly to Grange, who took his hands away from Gideon's shoulders and stepped back. *Well,* that *got their attention*, Gideon thought smugly.

"A boy and his bird... awful touching," Top Dollar said sardonically and Gideon started laughing — the stupid twits didn't even know when they'd been insulted! Shit, even Top Dollar was chuckling now.

It was the last sound he ever heard.

With the graceful strength of a trained swordsman, Top Dollar spun around and thrust the sword completely through the ugly little pawnbroker's throat, then stood watching him convulse grotesquely in his death throes.

"For the fuck's sake, *die!* will ya!" he shouted impatiently. "Gimme that thing," he gestured for one of Grange's guns and blasted two bullets into Gideon, finally stilling the twitching body. "Thanks," he said casually, handing it back — he'd use a gun when he had to, but he much preferred his blades.

Myca stared with cool speculation at the corpse before them — she'd take the eyes, of course, but otherwise it was just a damned nuisance. He embraced her sensuously, kissing her with a hot, erotic urgency — killing someone, even a slug like Gideon, always made him want her more than ever.

"Funboy said he saw a black bird too, a big one... then he choked to death on his own blood," the black man said calmly, unmoved by the grisly corpse. "I'll have the janitor... come on up." He left the room.

Myca turned her enigmatic face to her brother and shook her head slowly. "The black bird is the key! It is as I have feared — the Watcher has come."

"Yeah, so it would seem. But it doesn't sound like he's much interested in *us*, now, is he?"

"It is only a matter of time."

Top Dollar strode impatiently to the display case and restored the sword to its proper place. "Let 'im come, then. I'm lookin' forward to it."

> It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness & of pain: of strength & freedom. The beauty of disappointment & never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, & everlasting beauty of monotony.
>
> **— Benjamin Britten**

It was a wet but uneventful trip back to the apartment, and it was a good thing that Sarah didn't run into much traffic because her head was spinning. Had she forgotten what Eric looked like? It had been a whole year after all, and she hadn't gotten a good look at the stranger's face; and what he'd said was something anyone might've said. Except... he'd saved her life! Who else would do something like that in this neighbourhood? He hadn't even minded that she didn't thank him, that she'd kicked him and called him a creep. Who else was so *nice*?

Nobody! That's who. Nobody *alive*, anyway, except maybe Albrecht, or Mickey... or Les. But not a stranger, not somebody who didn't know her.

Eric knew her.

But Eric was dead.

None of it makes any sense, she thought, unlocking the apartment with the key she always wore on a chain around her neck. *Dead is dead... so who did I see*? Well, at least there was one mystery she could solve, she decided, kneeling down before a wooden crate full of records without even taking off her coat. Not that she wanted to — she always left a window open, except in the coldest weather, to clean out the stink and stuffiness of the squalid little apartment.

Almost feverishly she hunted through the albums until she found the one she was looking for. *Last Laugh* by Hangman's Joke, the cover read, with a familiar, cartoonish skeleton dancing around the words. She hadn't played it in a long time — it always made

her want to cry. But now there was something important she had to find out.

There it was, "Fire in the Rain", the last cut on side one. Carefully she put the record on the turntable and lifted the arm to the last track, then waited tensely for the music to start, drumming her fingers impatiently on the table. She wasn't really sure what good this was going to do, but she had to find out.

Of course, she knew the words already — she knew the words to *all* of Eric's songs. But this one was special — he'd written it for her! Or, at least, he'd *started* to write it for her, once when she'd gone to see them on a cold wet day... a lot like today... but it had ended up being for Shelly, like everything else he wrote, but she didn't mind, she still loved the words anyway:

Oh, it's a hard rain and a cold rain,
A bitter rain — the sky is cryin'.
Seems like it's been rainin' forever.
But it can't rain all the time.

Gonna light you a fire that the rain can't drown,
What do you care if the rain comes down.
Gonna light you a fire that'll burn forever,
Like the sun behind the clouds,
Like a billion burning stars.

I am the fire in the rain.

I'll dry the shadows in your soul,
I'll warm your body, I'll ease your pain,
I'll be your light in the darkness,

I am the fire in the rain.

Maybe someday, when she was grown up, she'd find somebody who felt that way about *her*. She hoped so, because there sure as hell wasn't anybody like that *now*!

Suddenly a familiar squawk drew her attention to the window, and she was astonished to see a crow flutter to rest on the window sill. It *couldn't* be... and yet... how many wild crows were there in this neighbourhood that came so close to her and cawed at her like they knew her?

"You again?" she said wonderingly, as she walked over to the big wet bird. Could it really be the same bird? She'd never thought much about crows before, but this one seemed special somehow — bigger, handsomer... weirder. "You lost? Or hungry?" she asked, wondering if she had anything to feed it. It really *was* looking at her like it knew her. "Hi," she said softly, yearningly. Maybe it would stick around and be her friend — a crow would make a great pet.

But, with an almost apologetic look, it leapt off of the sill and winged its way into the night. *It's almost like all he wanted to do was check up on me, to see that I got home okay*, she thought, turning her attention back to the record. Some dust must've caught on the needle, because it was sticking, repeating one phrase over and over again.

With a sigh of irritation, she started over to fix it, then she froze in surprise — the phrase it played again and again was the same one she'd heard the stranger say... and it was sung in the same voice!

"...Can't rain all the time... Can't rain all the time..."

Into the rain-drenched night he played *Shelly's Farewell*, sitting on the roof over the loft, oblivious to the wet and cold. He'd even stolen power from the pole next to the building to run the amps, although he had no idea how to do something like that. But this night was full of unanswered questions.

I still don't know what I am, he thought, his fingers stroking the guitar strings, the hypnotic melody crying his grief to the unsympathetic clouds. *First I was alive, and then I was dead, and then... nothing. I remember dying, but not what came after... until last night*. Ghost? Angel? Reincarnation? None of it fit, none of it made sense.

And there were still strange gaps in his memory — everything before he met Shelly seemed distant and out of focus. He looked over at the crow sitting impassively next to him. *And what are*

you, my friend, guiding me on this trail of vengeance... "O! that way madness lies; let me shun that," Oh yeah, Shakespeare knew about madness. But what good was any of it, what could he hope to change? God, he had failed them both: Too late to save Shelly, too dead to help Sarah. Why had he come back when nothing he'd done so far had changed *either* of those failures? Why was he compelled to avenge Shelly's death when Sarah was in far greater need of his help; and yet, he was prevented from really helping her. It was almost as if this terrible compulsion for vengeance had taken over his mind, leaving no room for anything else, except in this quiet time.

"Why! Why did I come back?" And the answer slashed back at him as it had again and again that night: *they all died the moment they touched her*.

The crow was gone again, flying off on its own business. Maybe it had other lost souls to guide through the city. Whatever. He'd been so lost in his music and thoughts he didn't even remember when it had left. But that didn't surprise him — memory just wasn't working right tonight. In just a few short hours he'd learned to hate his memories. They didn't come quietly — they leapt at him like ravening beasts, drawing blood with every touch, forcing him to relive every instant with all the intensity of the original experience. And when they didn't return, when he *couldn't* remember, it was like running into a wall in the dark.

He saw a flash of light at a distant window — someone listening, curious about the music drifting through the rain. Did they see him here on the roof, or just hear the sound of his guitar? Some ghost he was! He should at least be able to turn invisible. But he couldn't complain — what he *did* have served his purpose better than insubstantial ectoplasm.

No, Tin Tin and Gideon would not have been intimidated by a mere ghost, and Funboy probably saw worse in his drugged stupor's. And nothing less than real blood would ever satisfy the bloodlust burning within him.

[She is safe.] The crow fluttered to rest beside him, looking at him with its onyx eyes. She?... oh yes, Sarah. He bowed his head in simple gratitude towards the bird as he let the guitar bleed his song into the night.

I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them.

— Haggai 2:22

The crow was in flight again, over the rain-dark city and Eric was running with grim effortlessness below. Neither his strength nor purpose had dimmed, but the long relentless night of reprisal and remembrance had drained him and there was no joy, fierce or otherwise, in his graceful passage across the rooftops.

Two left... and only one of significance: T-bird. Yes, T-bird, then Skank, and then he would be... free. From what? For what? He didn't know, he couldn't think — thinking was too painful, his thoughts too corrosive, as if the invulnerability of his body had been paid for with the vulnerability of his soul.

Enough! Don't think! Follow the crow, follow it to T-bird.

"... I don't know. How many times I gotta tell you — we're in this together? If one part falls, we all fall!"

What was that? Through the crow's eyes he looked down on two men walking below. One was shouting at the other, both were angry. They were T-bird and Skank... and it was T-bird's turn to face his own mortality.

T-bird didn't know they had all started falling a year ago — and tonight was the night they would finally hit the ground.

"You know how long it took us to put this together? That piece of ratshit made Tin Tin into a fuckin' voodoo doll!" T-bird had to keep his peace around Top Dollar, but now he wanted to howl his rage — Tin Tin had been the most reliable man in his crew.

"Tin Tin was a dick!" Skank muttered sullenly — he hated the big black bully, but he'd always been part of T-bird's crew. Now he was gone.

"Tin Tin..." Suddenly T-bird stopped and began pumping his arms in their old rallying cry: "Fire it up! Fire it up!" Skank joined him, and for a moment the street rang with their tribute to their fallen comrade.

[A warrior's chant... but they do not deserve a warrior's death.]

Eric "heard" the contemptuous words as he slipped down to street level with the crow guiding him deftly into position. Then the two men came to a halt in front of a liquor store.

"No Funboy," T-bird said in irritation, looking at his watch, not worried yet, but not happy either — not after Tin Tin.

"Probably still banging away on Darla," Skank laughed, doing an impromptu bump-and-grind against a parking meter, chuckling like a demented twelve-year-old telling a dirty joke. *Not exactly*, Eric thought, knowing the *real* joke behind his words.

T-bird agreed with Skank, but ignored his screwing around — he was used to his antics and didn't see any point in encouraging them. Whistling to get his attention, he ordered, "Smokes and road beers. Be quick!" That was the nice thing about having someone like Skank around — he always followed orders, even for scut-work like that.

"I'm on it," Skank said brightly, bounding into the store, cheerfully doing his boss's bidding.

T-bird walked over to his pride and joy — his big red super-charged Thunderbird, complete with vanity plates reading: "TEE BIRD". He always locked the doors, even in this neighbourhood, where everybody knew that to touch *that* car was to get a one-way ticket to the morgue. He got in and settled himself comfortably into the driver's seat with a sigh, then lit a cigar, thinking gloomily about Tin Tin and the way he'd died.

He felt a wave of uneasiness when the crow landed on the hood of his car, then a sharp stab of fear when a bizarre figure arose with inhuman swiftness from the shadows of the back seat and held a gun to his head, so quickly that he only had time to lift his own gun a few inches.

"What the fuck are you supposed to be, man?" he quavered, his voice tight with dread.

"I'm your passenger," Eric said without emotion, his face impassive as he plucked T-bird's gun from his hand and his cigar from his lips. He'd had enough of being attacked and shot at, this time he would do what he had to do and be done with it. He grabbed the top of T-bird's head with pitiless, irresistible fingers and forced him to look straight ahead.

"Drive." That one quiet, ominous word was like ice running down T-bird's spine, and he could no more disobey it than he could stop the shaking of his hands as he fumbled the key into the ignition and started the car. For once the deep animal roar of the engine gave him no satisfaction, not even when the vibration sent the crow into flight off of the hood. Fear weighted his foot and the tires squealed as the big car screamed into the night.

Skank had his arms full of beer and his mouth full of potato chips, busily gathering everything T-bird had ordered and whatever else caught his eye, when he saw two little boys enter the store and pull out automatic weapons. "What's all this happy horseshit?" he gasped, slack-jawed with disbelief, as they threatened the clerk and started herding the customers over to the counter. The stupid little shits even took his .45 before he had a chance to stop them. They didn't know who he was, who he worked for. Damn, but they were gonna to be sorry when they found out.

Then he spotted T-bird's hot rod deserting him as it sped away down the street, and he forgot all about the grammar-school gangsters holding guns on him. He dropped his armload and ran heedlessly into the street, shouting his leader's name. But the young thugs weren't about to let their quarry escape, and the one who'd taken his .45 shot him in the leg with it before he ever reached the door.

But he didn't give a damn about that. "Hey, T-bird, T-bird," he wailed, limping into the street, staring with dismay into the darkness where his leader had disappeared. He never even saw the

little hatchback that smashed into him, lifting him into the air like a toy.

It flung him onto its windshield with a loud shattering of glass, then on over its low roof, where he finally fell with a groaning thud to the street. He was still trying to follow T-bird, when a rough pair of hands grabbed him and hauled him to unsteady feet. But their owner wasn't in a mood to offer help.

"What the fuck's the matter with you?" the driver bellowed. He was a big man, and in a vile temper. "You stupid ass-hair! You hit my car!" He swung and got one good solid hit on Skank, not realising that even the least of T-bird's crew was as vicious a fighter as anyone in the 'hood.

"What a classic!" one of the gun-toting little boys shouted, laughing hysterically at Skank's antics, but he never even heard them — random violence by under-age punks was the least of his worries.

Battered and wounded as he was, Skank laid the other man out with two wicked punches and dived into the little hatchback, his only thought being: follow T-bird and find out what had gone wrong.

> Fear tastes like a rusty knife.
>
> **— John Cheever**

T-bird was scared. He hadn't been this scared since he'd been in combat — but he was still thinking. It had always gotten him out of trouble before... it would again.

"Whaddya want, man? Money? Drugs? I got 'em." There had to be some way to get this guy to back off. "We could use you... you did Tin Tin. This is business, right?" Shit, anybody who could take out Tin Tin like that would give his crew a real edge.

But the guy in the back seat wasn't buying any of it. "Faster," was all he said, his voice so low it could barely be heard over the roar of the engine; and the deadly intensity in that one word sent cold sweat running down his ribs.

It was hard to drive at that speed, with the stranger's fingers clamped like vice-grips on the top of his head — it took every bit of his considerable skill to keep them and the big car all in one piece, and when he saw the red and blue lights in his rear-view mirror he got even tenser.

"Ah, look — makin' us popular. When they flash us like that, they ain't friends." The stranger was bothered by cops even less than he was by dangerous speeds, giving their pursuers no more than a casual glance before turning his cold eyes back to stare at him through the mirror.

T-bird swallowed hard. "If you got something personal, amigo, we can work it out, right?" He was starting to get desperate now. Dammit! How could this bastard charge in here like this and take over? Why wouldn't he answer? How could they cut a deal if the guy wouldn't say one damned word.

The crow flew high above them, looking down, and Eric watched through its eyes, a little unnerved behind his impassive mask by the speed and by T-bird's growing panic, and worried about the safety of the police car wailing in pursuit. But from the crow's perspective, so far overhead, it was almost harder to watch — he could see the terrible risks both cars were taking, the near misses, the scrambling pedestrians, the dodging cars. *If we crash now,* he wondered, *would even you be able to heal me?* Of course, he didn't care what happened to T-bird.

The police car was right on their tail — close enough for the policemen to see him clearly through the rear window. That wasn't good — the fewer people who saw him the better. How were they going to lose the police car? They should never have gotten involved in this in the first place: it was a private vengeance — no one else was supposed to get hurt.

Skank was having nothing but trouble.

The little hatchback didn't have a tenth of the power of T-bird's car — he'd lost them in seconds and was reduced to driving frantically back and forth looking for something that seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. The cracked windshield was nearly impossible to see out of; he didn't know

where he was going; pain and desperation were scrambling his already tangled thought processes.

Screaming in frustration, he fought his way through traffic, down alleys, and in and out of dead ends, with never a sight of T-bird. Shrieking, he stood on the brakes, skidding to a stop as a truck loomed out of nowhere, spraying the little car with an opaque shower of muddy water — now he couldn't see at all. He hit the wipers, but they only smeared the goo across the broken glass; he tried to roll down the window, but the crank broke off in his hand.

"Holy shit! Goddamn foreign cars!" he wailed, lost and helpless and hurting. "This ain't good, this ain't good!" He had to find T-bird, he was nothing without T-bird. No Tin Tin... no Funboy. It was just him and T-bird... Where was he? Where where where?

"*T-bird!*" he yelped in ecstasy when he saw the familiar red car flash across the alley ahead of him. At last! At last! "I got you, man! I'm comin'!" he called, flooring it, pushing the little car to its limit.

A squeal of brakes caught the crow's attention and it ducked its head to look behind: a little hatchback had just darted out of an alley directly into the path of the policemen! The crow wheeled in mid-air as the police car ploughed into the smaller car, shoving it fifty yards down the street with a raucous grinding of metal. Eric wept inside — this was just what he'd dreaded: more innocent lives forfeit... when would it ever end?

[No one is harmed who should not be harmed.]

The crow obligingly circled lower, and Eric saw a familiar, loathsome figure flop out of the little car and stumble away. It was Skank! Bloody, battered and limping, but not seriously injured. He looked over at the cops, who were dazed but unhurt — thanks to their air-bags — and he breathed a quiet sigh of relief. When he looked back for Skank, he saw him staggering around a corner, still in dogged pursuit of his leader. Silence reigned, except for the insistent pinging of the little hatchback's "door-open" alarm.

Then the bird flew ahead again, and Eric eased the pressure of his hand a fraction, allowing T-bird to slow down to a safer speed. Relentlessly he directed his prisoner to drive where the crow guided. By now Eric was so forbiddingly grim that he

repelled even himself. He'd said no more than five words to T-bird the whole time, not like he'd done with the others.

But what was there to say after all? By now he knew all he wanted to know about that night. This whole business had reached the point where it was nothing more than a messy clean-up job that had to be done.

Memory and vengeance drove him with twin scourges.

> A sound of cornered-animal fear... like the last sound the treed and shot and falling animal makes... when he finally doesn't care any more about anything but himself and his dying.
>
> **— Ken Kesey**

They out-drove the crow, but it didn't matter — he knew by now where they were to go. It was quiet on the old deserted wharf when they finally rolled to a stop — no sound but that of rats scuttling away from the light, and of the river lapping emptily at the pilings, smelling of sewage and lost hope.

By the time the bird drew close again, he'd lashed T-bird to the driver's seat with coil after coil of tough duct tape, and terror radiated from the bound man like the heat from one of his own arson fires.

"Do you remember Shelly Webster?" Eric asked quietly, walking back to the open trunk of the car to rummage through its pyrotechnic contents.

"Remember?... I remember everything... But I don't know what... what? *What*?" T-bird babbled, hardly aware of what he was saying. He tried to get a grip on himself, tried to understand what was happening to him. "What're you talking about? No, no, no... You mean that place downtown? Yeah, I remember her. We needed to put some fear into that little lady — she wasn't going along with our 'tenant relocation' program!" It was *business*! Couldn't the guy see that? And what did it have to do with here and now?

Eric picked over the liberal assortment of explosives T-bird carried with him — his "tools of the trade" — finally choosing a

simple, deadly-looking canister, and walked back to stand looking impassively at the imprisoned man.

T-bird was still hopelessly trying to justify himself, realising with every word that it was having no effect at all on his kidnapper. "... Then her idiot boyfriend shows up and turns a simple sweep-and-clear into a total cluster fuck! Who gives a shit — it's ancient history!"

"Simple sweep-and-clear"? Eric stiffened as a burning red rage overwhelmed him. *You want "simple sweep-and-clear"?* he thought and gathered all the barbed-wire memories of that night and flung them at T-bird's mind, not even knowing if he would be able to sense them or not.

T-bird sensed *something*. He blanched, staring up at Eric with terror in his eyes. "Why? Whaddya want? What is it? What?" Panic blurred his mind, nightmare images flashed before his eyes, and still the man before him kept silent. "Speak to me!" he begged, "Speak!" But Eric said nothing, haunted by memories of his own...

> *"Did you send us these petitions?" the leader said, pushing his way into the room, the familiar sheets of paper fluttering in his hands... she could taste blood in her mouth, feel the shattered bones grating in her cheek... "Abashed the devil stood..." she heard the words from a ringing distance... "does it get you sweaty?..." the words made no sense... she was so frightened... it hurts... it hurts... Eric? Where are you? ERIC! Help me! Help me!*

At last, the images sent into his mind began making connections and T-bird looked at Eric, almost sobbing in relief at having solved at least part of the puzzle. "I know you! I know you... I *knew* I knew you... I knew I knew you..." Then he blinked in horror at the implications of that recognition.

"But you ain't *you*... you can't be you. We put you through the window! There ain't no comin' back!" It was getting harder for him to breath. "This is the really real world — there ain't no comin' back! We killed you *dead* — there ain't no comin' back!" He said it over and over, as if somehow the repetition could make it true.

But Eric merely ripped off another length of tape, watching unmoved when T-bird winced at the sound, and started winding it around the imprisoned man's head, immobilising it against the

head-rest. T-bird began to strain helplessly against the unyielding tape.

Eric had taped and tied the steering wheel and gas pedal in fixed positions, and now he reached in and started the car, then pulled a pin out of the canister he held and tossed it between T-bird's legs, where it sizzled and sputtered like a Fourth of July rocket. T-bird looked down at his own doom, and fear took him completely. Only one image remained of all those Eric had sent him and he clung to it like a lifeline, drowning in the sea of his own evil.

"'Abashed the devil stood, and felt how awful goodness is...'" The big engine almost drowned out the noise of the sputtering incendiary device in T-bird's lap, and he began to choke on his own words. "'... felt how awful... goodness...'"

The time had finally come for T-bird to look upon his own evil and die recognising it, terrified by what he saw.

Eric put the car in gear, and for the last time its tires squealed as it gathered speed down the long wharf, away from the vulnerable wooden buildings and piers, away from Eric who gave it an ironic two-fingered wave before beginning to squirt lighter fluid in a now familiar outline onto the wooden surface of the dock.

As the two T-birds arced into the air at the end of the wharf, Eric lit T-bird's lighter and tossed it onto the spill of fluid; and as the air over the water blossomed into a fiery cascade of metal and explosives, a quiet serpent of flame outlined Eric's signature of vengeance, branding the wood with the image of a giant crow before the rain snuffed it out.

The crow fluttered down to land on his shoulder as he strode imperturbably through the leaping flames, untouched by their searing fingers. And where T-bird had been, only a few hissing pieces of molten metal sank quietly beneath the water.

He is not here: behold the place where they laid him.

— Mark 16:6

The thin sunlight of the late October dawn did nothing to dissipate the chill that Grange felt as he walked warily into the old churchyard, but he made no complaint. Myca had her reasons for sending him to seek out Eric Draven's final resting place. And he had a pretty good idea of what to expect when he found it.

Even so, his fabled equanimity was shaken when he saw what awaited him in front of the simple headstone marked "Eric Draven". With an impassive face that hid a troubled mind, he squatted in the mud beside the gaping hole and stared into the empty coffin it revealed.

It was real, he thought, drawing his fingers through the crumbling dirt — impossible, but real. But then, after years of working with Myca and her otherworldly alchemies, he was used to things that were impossible but real.

He just wished this one were working with them instead of against them.

Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

— Oscar Wilde

"This is the seven a.m. edition of Action News. For over a decade, the night before Halloween has had a darker and deadlier nickname in the inner city — Devil's Night — the name given to what has become an annual plague of arson. Last year over 200 blazes were reported and eleven people lost their lives. Tonight will repeat what may become the biggest and deadliest Devil's Night ever. The mayor has fire-fighters from all surrounding counties, as well as..."

It wasn't the sound of the television that finally woke Sarah up, but the completely unfamiliar sounds and smells of somebody cooking breakfast in the tiny kitchen. With a groan, she realised she'd fallen asleep on her couch-bed still in her wet clothes and clutching Eric's album to her chest. She was stiff and even still a little damp in places — at least she'd had the good sense to drag a blanket over herself before zonking out.

She'd fallen asleep looking at Eric's picture on the album cover, wondering if it really had been him she'd seen. And if it was, why had he disappeared? Why hadn't he stayed, talked to her, kept her company for a little while at least?

But what the hell was going on in the kitchen?

She got off of the couch groggily, rubbing her gummy eyes while she stared in disbelief at Darla bustling distractedly around the kitchen. There was something definitely wrong here — she hardly recognised her mother — no make-up, hair still wet from the shower. She looked younger somehow... and prettier.

Eggs, bacon, toast, juice... Darla! This was even harder to believe than some guy who looked and sounded like Eric and quoted from his song... and disappeared into thin air.

Carefully she put Eric's album down in a safe place and started warily towards the kitchen, blinking a little in the early morning sunlight which streamed in through the windows — the rain had finally stopped... for a while at least. "Can't rain all the time," just like *he*'d said... this was getting too weird. Then she hesitated when Darla looked over and saw her. The look her mother gave her was as unfamiliar as her behaviour — shy, hopeful, almost apologetic as she clutched mismatched salt and pepper shakers to her chest like they were some kind of talisman.

"You like them up or over?" she asked tentatively. "I can't remember?"

"What are you doing?" Sarah asked resentfully, remembering last night. "I don't even *like* eggs." Which wasn't exactly true, but she didn't trust whoever it was that had invaded the kitchen.

"Wait... you *loved* eggs," Darla protested, a little desperately... as if it really mattered somehow.

"Yeah... when I was *five*," Sarah grumbled in disgust, *which was probably the last time you bothered to make anything for me*, her expression added, as she sat down and stonily watched her mother pour her some apple juice. She stared at the glass like it might contain poison.

"So whaddya want now?" Darla persisted brightly, "black coffee and cigarettes?" But a pathetic desperation lurked under her jaunty words, and Sarah didn't trust her at all.

"So, what did you take to become 'mother of the year'? she asked sullenly, withdrawing visibly from her mother's anxious efforts to please.

"Oh... it wasn't drugs," she said with an eerie kind of wonder in her voice. "Someone kind of... woke me up," and her face softened into awe as if she were remembering something wonderful.

"Who?" Sarah asked, her own face pinching with suspicion. What was going on here? This whole thing was making her very uncomfortable... and yet — maybe she wasn't the only one to have had a strange encounter last night.

"Oh... it was nuts," Darla said helplessly, not meeting her daughter's eye.

She's hiding something, Sarah thought angrily. Woke her up without drugs? Yeah, right. Nobody could do that. *Nobody can come back from the dead, either!* whispered a small voice.

"You're acting weird," Sarah snapped, suddenly frightened of everything that was going on. She couldn't take it anymore, she had to push it all away before she got hurt again.

"Didya win the lottery or something, *Darla?*" she said with heavy insolence, her face radiating distrust. No way was she going to let a shitty breakfast make up for all Darla had done... and hadn't done.

If she'd wanted to hurt her mother, she succeeded... but it was a bitter success.

"Oh, forget it." Her mother's face crumpled as years of weary defeat crushed down on her with Sarah's cynical words. Failure etched her face as she picked up the frying pan and took it over to the trash can. "I never was too good at this 'mommy' shit."

But there was something about the bitterness and disappointment in her voice that cut Sarah to the quick, and she leapt to her feet in dismay. "Over easy!" she cried urgently, and her spirits lifted when she saw that hopeful look return to her mother's face again, as if a couple of eggs had wiped out years of disillusionment.

"I like them over easy... Mom," she repeated shyly, as if to a stranger. But she had a feeling that something extraordinary had happened last night, and maybe neither of them was the same person anymore.

With an anxious smile, her mother flipped first one egg and then the other, and glanced up at Sarah with a nervous giggle. Like two kids together, Sarah joined her laughter, leaving the door open for more, as she'd done last night for... whoever.

It wasn't much, but it was a beginning.

Breakfast was full of awkward silences as they both clumsily felt their way into a new relationship, but by the time they washed the dishes together, they were both becoming more at ease. Finally her mother dried her hands and opened the morning paper out onto the table.

"I got the paper this morning," she pointed out unnecessarily. "See, I... I wanted to check a few things out." Then she turned to the want ads and wistfully traced her fingers down the columns marked "help wanted". "I thought I might look for another job," she said, a little fearfully, and looked at Sarah as if she expected her to reject the whole idea with scorn.

But Sarah was overjoyed. "That's great, Mom. Then maybe you wouldn't mind me comin' by."

Her mother winced a little when she said that, remembering the night before. Biting her lip, she looked at the clock and frowned. "Um... when do you have to be at school?"

For a moment Sarah was annoyed, then she shrugged. How could she know after all? This was supposed to be a new beginning. "I got plenty of time. And they're letting us out early today, 'cause of, you know... Devil's Night."

Her mother's eyes went wide with fear... and something else — that *remembering* look again, but by now Sarah knew her mother wasn't going to tell her whatever it was she was remembering. Still... she had an idea. It was kind of a trick, but she had to have some answers or she was going to go crazy.

She showered and dressed for school in a whirlwind fifteen minutes, then took another five to make a careful drawing on a clean sheet of paper. Then, with a pounding heart, she took it to her mother, who was engrossed in copying information from the newspaper.

"Look, Mom, I did this for my art class," she said abruptly, shoving the drawing under her mother's nose, and watched her face intently.

Her reaction was striking... and revealing — she jumped a foot and went white as a sheet, staring at the drawing with open-mouthed shock. Sarah smiled sweetly, but was unable to keep the smugness out of her voice as she explained, "It's a clown-face, see. My teacher says I draw faces real good, he says I have a 'talent for portraiture', whatever that means. Think this one's worth an 'A'?" she asked innocently.

It was a remarkable likeness, worth every bit of an "A". The face that stared up at Darla from the drawing paper was unmistakable — that strong jaw, that long tangled mane of dark hair, those piercing eyes and beautifully curved lips... and the

make-up, like a circus mask — black slashes over black-rimmed eyes, black grinning mouth. She almost couldn't bear to look at it, remembering...

"Uh... I... yeah. Sure," her mother faltered, touching the drawing with trembling fingers. She looked up at Sarah and swallowed with difficulty, as if her mouth had suddenly gone dry.

"What's the matter, Mom? You look like you've seen a ghost," Sarah asked, a little cruelly, knowing now, as surely as if she'd been told, who had "awakened" her mother. "It's just somebody I saw last night. He... he kinda saved my life," she added softly.

"Saved your *life*?" her mother yelped, stunned by this second blow coming so soon after the first.

"Yeah, I wasn't watching where I was going, almost got hit by a car. But he pulled me back in time. No big deal," she added with a little shake of her head, knowing that it was a *very* big deal.

"Did you... thank him?"

"Uh, not really. I think he was in a hurry to go somewhere," Sarah said guiltily.

"I wish you had," her mother whispered, staring fixedly at the drawing, then she lifted her eyes, and Sarah was startled to see tears shimmer and start to spill over. "I think we both have a lot to thank him for." Then, to Sarah's surprise, she held out her arms and gave her daughter a fierce hug, and the next thing she knew, they *both* were crying.

Finally her mother pushed her away with a loud sniffle. "G'wan, Hon, or you'll be late for school. And, uh... could I have this drawing when you're done with it." She looked down at it again with awe.

"Ah, go ahead and keep it. We're not having art today anyway." Her mother blushed as she realised how she'd been tricked, then smiled ruefully.

"Thank you, Sarah... for everything."

"Yeah. Uh... you too," Sarah said, hurrying out the door, still finding it almost impossible to say thank you to *anyone*.

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns.

— William Shakespeare

Officer Albrecht had awakened that morning feeling like one of the great mysteries of the universe had been revealed to him. *Life after death*! And he'd had living proof of it in his front room! Well, maybe "living" wasn't exactly the right word for whatever Eric Draven was... and yet, he'd seemed so very alive. His hands had been warm and solid when they'd touched his face, and the way he'd crashed across the room afterwards had been anything but ghost-like. And the sadness he carried with him — so much sorrow and grief... those were *living* emotions.

But that business of seeing Shelly's death through his eyes, and coming in through his bedroom window — on the fifth floor with only a narrow ledge — and the way he disappeared from plain sight outside Gideon's... no, those weren't exactly *human*-like either.

I don't know what *I am*. What a damned thing for a man to have to say. But dead or alive, human or ghost, Eric Draven *was* back, that was for sure. And just the fact that anyone *could* come back was a great wonder in itself. It meant that death *wasn't* the end, that *something* of a man lived beyond it.

But Albrecht had seen a lot of death in his years on the force, so why was this the first "ghost" he'd seen? Why had Eric Draven come back, and none of the others? Then again, how did he know they hadn't? The city could be crawling with solid-flesh ghosts for all he knew — Eric was just the only one who'd ever stopped by his place for a beer and conversation. Yeah, that might explain some of the weirder things that went on — stuff that was buried in police reports and never made it to the evening news.

Like the bizarre way Tin Tin was murdered — of course, Draven had practically admitted to that one, out there by Gideon's. *He died a year ago — the moment he touched her*. T-bird's crew. He'd

suspected them right from the start, but without evidence and the only witnesses dead or scared into silence, he hadn't even tried to make a case — as if it would've done any good if he had. *They're* all *dead, they just don't know it yet.* Yeah, it looked like Draven was going to take care of it.

Oh, it was vigilantism of course, which he looked upon with all the disdain of the professional for an amateur with an agenda. But, in Draven's case, he wasn't going to judge the man... or whatever he was. If anyone ever deserved to exact revenge, it was Eric Draven, and Albrecht could only cheer his efforts.

Like the report he'd heard just before he'd left the station: Funboy dead, shot and forcibly OD'd, with the bloody outline of a bird on his chest. What the hell did the bird mean? he wondered. A skull would've made better sense, or some other symbol related to Draven's band, or to the make-up he was wearing. *Well, if I ever see him again, maybe I'll ask him*, he thought. And maybe he'd have enough nerve to ask some of the *big* questions, like — what was it like wherever he'd come from.

The station was humming when he got in, gearing up for Devil's Night — double shifts for everybody and nobody taking leave. It was going to be a helluva night — us against them, but everybody had been through it before... and besides, Eric Draven was out there somewhere, evening up the odds. Just the thought of that put him in a good mood.

"Hey, Albrecht!" Damn! *That* was a voice that could destroy the best of moods. Albrecht sighed and came to a halt by Detective Torres' office, reaching for the sheaf of photographs the other man was waving aggressively at him.

"This is the third hit in your 'hood in twenty-four hours! We just fished this out of the river. He's fused to his own car — we're gonna have to ID his teeth!"

The angry frustration in the detective's voice fell like sweet music on Albrecht's ears as he thumbed through the pictures. Man and car were totally unrecognisable, except for one fragment of the distinctive Thunderbird chrome-work. The last photo in the group showed the charred outline of a bird on some kind of wooden surface, but he didn't really need to see it to know that Draven had found the third "dead man" who had murdered him and Shelly.

"His name's T-bird," he volunteered smugly, unable to resist the temptation. "Arson was his speciality. Looks like he zigged when he shoulda zagged." He handed Torres the pile of photos with an air of satisfaction. *One less fire-starter for tonight anyway.* "Case closed."

"Bull-fuckin'-shit! C'mere." Uh-oh, maybe he'd pushed a little too hard, but how often did he get such an opportunity? He followed Torres into his office, watching him warily.

"You're holding out on me!" Well, that was true enough, but Torres would never be able to handle the truth, even if he'd been willing to tell him. "I got a God-damned vigilante killer knocking off scum-bags left and right. And you're covering up for somebody. Who's the cartoon character with the painted face?"

You don't really want to know. "Hey, you're the detective. Why don't you tell me?"

Hatred twisted the detective's acne-scarred face as he sputtered into his list of complaints. "Okay! Gideon's blows all to hell, and you're having a chit-chat with some weirdo who winds up in T-bird's car when it zigs instead of zags. Then you steal one of *my* case files from homicide, and you're saying this is just a fuckin' *automobile* accident? C'mon!"

Damn! So he'd found out about the file — not good. And Draven had been seen in T-bird's car — that could be a problem. But nothing of those thoughts showed on his face as he smiled benevolently at the angry detective.

"Yeah. Good speech though — I didn't want to interrupt you, it sounded good. You gotta write that shit down." He was smirking a little by the time he'd finished — he never could resist getting a dig in whenever he could... the trouble was, he usually had to pay for it later.

"Alright, smartass," Torres sneered, looking too damned smug himself, and Albrecht tensed, having a feeling that pay-back time was coming *now* instead of later. "The Captain's got a little love-note waiting for you. Welcome to the first day of the rest of your suspension!"

"*Suspension*!?" Oh God! This was worse than anything he'd expected. "For *what?*"

"Misconduct!" Torres snapped triumphantly, dismissing him.

Albrecht stalked out of the office in a black rage. *Misconduct*? Who the hell was he kidding? If *anyone* was guilty of misconduct, it was Torres — suppressing evidence, misdirecting investigations. If he'd ever doubted Torres was in Top Dollar's pocket, *this* proved it.

But just to be sure, he went to see what the Captain had to say.

"I'm sorry, Albrecht, but Torres' complaints are legitimate. And it's all there on your record — there's nothing I can do."

Albrecht knew he'd say that, but he'd hoped for something more — he and the Captain went 'way back together. "So, Torres is right and I'm wrong?" he asked bitterly.

"It's not that simple, Albrecht, and you know it. Look, I've covered your ass as best I could for the last two years — this time you've gone too far. My hands are tied."

"Yeah, and I know who supplied the rope to tie 'em." The Captain started to get up indignantly, but Albrecht waved him down. "No, no. I'm goin'. Forget I said anything." As he left the Captain's office he paused in the doorway and looked back sadly at his one-time friend. "If you need another man tonight, you know where to find me." It was still "us against them", even if the lines did get a little blurred at times.

Suspense in news is torture.

— John Milton

Sarah wished she didn't have to go to school today, and not just because it was Devil's Night — there was so damned much to think about. Who was the man in the clown make-up, and just what had he done to turn her mother around like that? It *couldn't* be Eric! She'd watched them carry away the shattered remains of his body exactly a year ago tonight. She'd read the newspaper articles that said he'd been stabbed and shot before he was ever thrown from the window to fall six stories. You couldn't get any deader than that! She'd gone to his funeral, and visited his grave every couple of days for a whole year — he was dead and under the ground, not walking the streets in white make-up helping out his old friends.

But if it wasn't Eric, *who was it*?

When she got to school, she hung back from the knots of chattering kids, wanting more than ever just to be alone with her thoughts. But today, that was going to be impossible — the whole school-yard was seething with gossip, and the other kids weren't going to let her escape it.

"Didya hear what happened to your mom's boyfriend?" they asked, clustering around her avidly.

"Yeah, he's *dead*! OD'd last night."

"Nah! Rip-rap said he was shot!"

"And Tin Tin got it too. I heard he was stuck *full* of knives..."

"... And T-bird got blown up in his own fuckin' car..."

"And the Arcade and Gideon's got blown up too..."

"Yeah, and they found Gideon's body in an alley, all burnt up."

"And Alison, from the Arcade, too."

"No, you jerk. They found her in a *different* alley."

"So? Whaddya know about all this shit?"

"No... no, I didn't know... except about the Arcade. I... I saw *that*!" Sarah gasped breathlessly, trying to sort out the jumble of voices around her. "You mean... they're all *dead*?"

"Yeah, all dead," she was assured by half a dozen voices at once, all of them shivering in a strange mix of terror and delight — this was better than a horror movie, but at the same time, it was all a little too close for comfort.

"Didn't Funboy hang around with T-bird and Tin Tin a lot?" one of the boys asked, eyes wide with the thoughts of plots and conspiracies beyond his understanding.

"Yeah," Sarah agreed nervously, "and another one, a mean little bastard named Skank." She shuddered as she remembered the time he'd caught her in the alley outside of The Pit. If T-bird hadn't whistled him off of her, she knew what would've happened.

"Oh, *him*. I heard he got the shit beat outta him last night."

"So, who's it takin' out T-bird's crew?"

"Yeah, and why?"

"Stupid question! T-bird's a real badass!"

"Yeah, but don't he work for Top Dollar?"

At the sound of that name a silence fell over the little group, and they all shared a shiver of real dread. Sarah looked at them with an icy chill spreading through her. She knew that these kids had access to the hottest gossip in the neighbourhood and although it was exaggerated and distorted, there was usually a lot of truth in it.

"You sure nobody knows who did it?" she asked shakily.

"Well, I heard there was a guy with a white face hanging around Gideon's..." one boy volunteered.

"So? What the hell's that supposed to mean?" another challenged.

"I dunno, it's just kinda weird."

"It's *all* fuckin' weird!"

But Sarah wasn't paying any attention to them by that time, not once she heard "guy with a white face". It was *him* again... it *had* to be. And he was killing off T-Bird's crew one by one, although she didn't know where Gideon's and the Arcade fit in.

But why T-Bird? She had the horrible feeling that she already knew the answer to that question: All this past year, every time she'd asked herself, *Did this one kill Eric?*, the answer had been in front of her all the time.

It had been her own mother's boyfriend!

For the first time in her life, she was glad to hear the school-bell ring.

Sarah avoided everybody when they were all let out of school early as promised, and took a wide detour on the way home to stand in a filthy alley and stare open-mouthed at an eerie figure outlined on the wall. "An eagle", the kids had said it was, although many had been convinced it was a Thunderbird like on T-Bird's car, but Sarah knew better. She'd seen the model for it perched on Eric's gravestone and on her own windowsill: it was a crow.

And according to her informants, there was another just like it charred into the wood of the wharf where T-Bird himself had met his fiery end; and, it was whispered, another one had been drawn on Funboy's chest with his own blood.

But why the crow? She'd stolen a moment from class time to look up "crow" in the encyclopaedia and found out more than she wanted to know about the habits and natural history of the bird, and just a few hints about what it had once meant to people living in simpler times — messenger of death, and guide to things spiritual.

Could the crow have somehow brought Eric back? As a ghost? But what kind of ghost was made of solid, warm flesh? She remembered the strength in the arms that had snatched her to safety the night before, and the heart that she'd felt pounding under her ear when he set her down. Ghosts weren't like that? Or were they? How could she know, after all? — it wasn't like she'd ever met one before.

By the time she reached home, she didn't know *what* to think, just that she'd give anything to see... whoever... again. And she wanted to talk to her mother again about who *she'd* seen, the guy who'd "woke her up". But Darla was gone and another shock awaited Sarah when she walked into the apartment.

It was clean! Or, at least, as clean as one morning's steady work could make it — things had been swept, tidied and scrubbed, all the trash had been thrown out and there were neat piles stacked in the corners of stuff to be sorted through later. Sarah barely recognised the place, and she walked around it in stunned amazement before she even noticed the note left in the middle of the clean kitchen table: "I have a couple of job interviews this afternoon. I'll be home before dark. Wish me luck. Mom."

"Job interviews! Wow, she's serious," Sarah muttered to the unfamiliar room. "I wonder if she's heard about Funboy yet, or the others." Probably — the grown-ups' gossip mill was even faster than the kids'. She wondered what her mom was feeling right now — everything seemed to have changed overnight and Sarah wasn't too sure she could keep up with it. Shit, there was even fresh fruit in a bowl to snack on!

There were too many questions and not enough answers. And no one to ask, either. She could ask her mom — maybe — except she wasn't here. She could've asked Shelly or Eric, if they were still alive, but if they'd been alive, there wouldn't *be* any questions. She could ask that stranger — who *might* be Eric... if she could find him again. So, where would a ghost go in the daytime? Back to his grave?

Or back to the place where he'd died? Back to the loft?

Back to the loft! Sarah thought with a nervous shiver. She'd avoided that whole part of the neighbourhood ever since that awful night — the very thought of seeing where they'd suffered and died was more than she could bear. But now...

With sudden determination, she grabbed her skateboard and an apple from the bowl and headed back out the door. She had to find out, had to know for sure... even if she was completely wrong about the whole thing.

The last time I came this way... her mind kept repeating as she skated closer to the old Calderon Court Apartments. It had been later, of course, and raining that night (that much was still

the same — a storm had rolled in while she was in school, drowning the promise of the morning sun), and there'd been fires everywhere (and that would be the same too, in a few more hours), and there'd been police cars and fire trucks everywhere in the street below the loft... and an ambulance.

But there was nothing there now, in the dismal light of a cloudy late afternoon — just the boarded-up entryway of an abandoned building and warning signs posted all over it. She felt a little lost somehow when she saw that — she hadn't realised that the place was empty, was as dead as Eric and Shelly. It seemed fitting somehow: like the whole building was a memorial to them. At least, it was better than someone else moving into what had been their home.

As thunder rolled heavily overhead, promising ever more rain, Sarah tugged on the carelessly nailed planks blocking the doorway. They came off easily even though she wasn't all that strong, and she wondered why no one had broken in before her. This was just the kind of place that would normally get turned into a crack house... or worse.

But the whole place was silent as she began climbing the five flights of stairs to the loft... as silent as the grave, she thought, with a shudder at the eeriness of it all. She didn't know what she might find in here — crazed druggies, weapons stash, homeless winos sleeping it off, runaways and street kids looking for shelter — anybody and anything could be in here.

But by the time she reached the top floor, she realised that the whole vast building was empty of all human life but her own — not a sound reached her from inside the long halls, no foot but hers had walked the dusty floors, no hand but hers had pushed away the clinging cobwebs. It was like walking through the set of a horror movie, only this was real.

And was there a real ghost waiting for her on the top floor? *Well, if there is, it's Eric's ghost, and he used to be my best friend, so I can't be afraid of him now.* That thought steadied her when the quiet and the emptiness started getting on her nerves, and she kept on climbing, pausing every now and then to listen for... whatever.

> But, truly, I have wept too much! The Dawns are heartbreaking.
>
> Every moon is atrocious and every sun bitter.
>
> **— Arthur Rimbaud**

Eric had returned to the loft when the thin morning light drove him to hide from the eyes of mortal men. But once back inside, memories of Shelly crept out to invade his mind again, and this time he didn't even try to resist them. He could think of Shelly... or of blood; and until the crow came back to lead him to Skank, he'd rather think of Shelly, in spite of the pain it cost him.

He lit a fire in the fireplace with the logs that were still stacked next to it and found the box of photographs on the shelf in the closet, still untouched although everything around it had been ripped and scattered. Lovingly he pulled it down as Gabriel joined him, and began letting each photo draw him into it, reliving every experience anew as tears flowed over his painted cheeks.

> *"Seven blackbirds in a tree, count them and see what they be. One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret that's never been told" She giggled tenderly over the old counting rhyme, stroking his arm lovingly. "What would you like, Eric, a boy or girl?" "A little girl of course, just as beautiful as you." "And then a little boy," she sighed, "just as handsome as* you*!"...*
>
> *He sat cross-legged on the floor of the loft, playing softly on his guitar while she worked busily in the kitchen across from him — he was composing another love song — everything he wrote anymore was a love song, but love was all he felt anymore...*

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." he read, every word awakening to new life as he spoke it, then he felt a chill when he reached the last three lines:

I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!
— and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death....

Then he relaxed with a rueful smile — nothing like that was going to happen anytime soon. Better he should read Robert *Browning:*

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made...

She slept quietly in his arms, bathed in the afterglow of their love-making, so sweet, so warm, so trusting. His flesh sang where it touched hers, and his eyes misted with tears as he looked down on her loveliness...

The field of wildflowers was so beautiful, but Shelly was more beautiful still, and he lifted her in his arms, drinking in her sweet fragrance, and danced with her amid the sunlit flowers...

He had no idea how much time had passed in the present, while he wandered the corridors of the past, but suddenly the crow snapped him back into the here-and-now with an urgent "Caw!" In a daze he lifted his head, then moved with inhuman swiftness.

Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.

— William Blake

Finally Sarah reached the last landing and stood before the still Halloween-decorated door to Shelly's one-time home... and it was open! Just a crack, but *someone* had been there before her! The yellow crime-scene tape had been pulled away, and — she discovered as she peered around looking for other clues — there were muddy footprints leading up to the door from back along the hall and around a corner that she knew led to the stairs going up to the roof.

Would a ghost have come in from the *roof*? Well, maybe... if he didn't want anybody to see him. Which made sense... as much as *anything* made sense in this whole crazy business. And would *he* be there now? Or nobody? Or somebody else, somebody that she'd rather not meet?

Well, the only way to find out was to go inside, and so, with a wary look around, she pushed the door open and walked cautiously into the room.

It was awful! It was worse than she'd been afraid it would be. It was a mess! Shelly had been so neat, so proud of the way she'd fixed the place up — she'd loved the old iron pyramid beams and the big round window, but it was all ruined now. The window was broken (by Eric falling through it, she remembered, shivering) and everything was smashed and scattered all over the floor — papers and books and pages of books, and the roof was leaking rainwater over it all with an empty, echo-y sound.

"Eric?" she called tentatively, feeling silly and depressed at the same time. "Man, Sarah, you're going crazy." There was nothing in this room but bitter memories — she'd climbed five flights of stairs for nothing. But wait, what was that?

A plaintive "meow" almost made her jump, before she recognised the fluffy white cat approaching her. "Gabriel! I thought you were dead!" Yeah, dead along with everything else in here. She knelt in relief and welcomed the lonely cat into her arms, taking comfort in his hairy warmth and rumbling purr. But the stranger had been warm too... "You're not dead... are you?" she asked, not entirely convinced by the cat's solidity. Then her nose wrinkled as she smelled fresh woodsmoke.

Woodsmoke? In this rain-soaked place? With a sinking feeling she turned to the fireplace, and her stomach gave a jump when she saw the thin tendrils of smoke still curling up from the logs set into it. *Someone had been there, just minutes before!*

Slowly, still carrying Gabriel, she walked over to the fireplace and looked down at the ashes littering it. Some of them still held the shape of what they'd been — sheets of paper... or photographs. There was one, only half-burned, peeking out from under the logs, and she reached carefully for it.

It was Shelly and Eric, laughing, happy... alive. She let it flutter out of her nerveless fingers, hardly able to bear the sight of them, so carefree, so unaware of what was going to happen to them. But at least, *one* of her questions had been answered. She set Gabriel down and turned away from the fireplace.

"I knew it was you," she said, almost sadly, to the empty room. "Even with the make-up. I remembered your song." She wandered aimlessly around the room, looking without hope for someone who wasn't there. "You said: 'Can't rain *all* the time'. That *is* from your song? Right?" But only silence greeted her voice — a whole room as silent as a grave. She saw the jar of white face makeup, and the black lipstick that she and Shelly had bought for that long-ago Halloween, and wasn't surprised to see that they'd been used recently. There was a broad smear across the dust on Shelly's dressing table, and that looked fresh too.

She sighed in frustration and disappointment, then caught her breath in sudden hope as a crow — *the* crow — flew into the room and landed on one of the iron beams. It blinked quizzically down at her and cawed in a familiar way, its claws ringing metallically on the beam. If the crow was here, it *had* to mean *something*.

"Aw, c'mon Eric, I know you're here," she quavered, a little desperately. "I *miss* you... and Shelly. Gets so lonely all by

myself," she finished miserably, admitting to him what she'd never dared to admit to herself.

But there was no answer, no sound at all except the desolate, endless drip of rain. *It* can *rain all the time*, she thought bitterly, finally realising that he'd betrayed her hopes just like everyone else had.

"The hell with you," she muttered, disillusioned and resentful, as she picked up her skateboard and turned to leave the room that held nothing but things best left forgotten. "I thought you *cared*!"

But she'd taken no more than a single step, when, by some miracle, the sinking sun found a hole in the clouds and sent a shimmering golden circle of light through the round window to fall against the wall before her... and haloed in that molten sunlight was the shadow of a slender, graceful man.

"Sarah," a voice whispered from behind her, a voice as endlessly sad as time itself, and she spun around in sudden hope at the sound of it. "I *do* care," he protested gently, turning all her despair into joy; and, with a glad cry, she dropped her skateboard and ran tearfully into his waiting embrace.

He knelt to gather her to him — two strong arms wrapped around her, and a strong heart pounded against her own, his warm hand reached up to cradle her head to his shoulder, and his tears were warm and wet against her neck. He was real, real, *real!*

"It *was* you, I knew it was you!" she murmured over and over again, squeezing her eyes shut against the brilliant sunlight and her own burning tears. "You came back, you really came back."

"Sarah, I didn't come back... for this," he said painfully, as the sunlight faded behind the clouds again, pushing her gently away so that he could search her face.

"I... I know," she hiccuped, fishing in her pocket for a clean tissue. "It was for *them*, T-Bird and the others. Because of what they did... to you and Shelly. I saw you... I saw what they did to you. I was coming over to stay with you — I was afraid of the fires... and I saw you both..."

"Oh, sweetheart, I wish you hadn't."

"But I did! And I wish I'd been here, with you! I wish I'd died too," she wailed, baring her last secret to him, without thinking of the pain she'd cause.

"Oh no, please, Sarah. Don't say that... you don't know. You have to live, and grow up, and do everything you're meant to do. You can't let them win!"

"But you and Shelly were the only friends I ever had!" she sniffed, looking back at him almost accusingly.

"What about Officer Albrecht? What about your mother?" he asked tenderly, holding her firmly away from him.

"She *did* see you then, didn't she? Last night... after I did, on the street. Was she *there*? When you... killed Funboy?" she finished in a whisper.

"No... but I did frighten her — badly. I'm sorry for that," he said with quiet sadness.

"Well, *I'm* not. She said you woke her up, and you did — she's different now. Everything's different... after last night. What did you say to her?"

He smiled gently at her, "I only reminded her of something she already knew."

"So, what're you going to do now?" She had trouble keeping her voice from shaking as she asked him that all-important question.

"There's still one left, Sarah. I have to find him. And then I have to leave," he said with such grim finality that she knew it was hopeless to plead with him to stay.

"One more... you mean Skank, don't you?" and she shuddered at the memory of groping hands and foetid breath.

"What's wrong? Did he hurt you?" Eric's anger hit her like a Devil's Night fire, and it wasn't even directed towards her. She could almost feel sorry for Skank... almost, but not quite.

"He *tried* to — last month. I guess he thought if Funboy had Darla, he could have *me*. But T-Bird called him off before he got very far — never thought I'd be grateful to *him* for anything... 'sides, I kicked him in the balls and that kind of slowed him down." Suddenly a horrible thought struck her: Skank must've

tried the same things with Shelly that night, except, nobody stopped him then. It made her want to throw up, just thinking of him even *touching* Shelly.

"He won't hurt you ever again," Eric promised forbiddingly, his voice harsh and unrecognisable. "He'll never hurt *anyone* again."

"Why, Eric? Why did it have to happen?" she sobbed, asking yet again the oldest of the unanswerable questions. Eric could only shake his head, his grey eyes awash in tears.

"All I know is that I have to do what they stopped me from doing that night — I have to get to Shelly. But I can't reach *her* without going through *them* first. That's all I came back for — not for the living... not for you, Sarah. I'm sorry. Just for those four men .. who were dead the moment they touched her. When that's done, then I can leave here."

"But where will you go?"

"I don't know. Wherever Shelly is." He smiled ruefully at her, smoothing her wet hair away from her face. "Do you think heaven will have me after last night?"

"They better! They'll probably have a parade for you," she said, trying unsuccessfully to swallow the lump in her throat.

"You can have the rest of the photographs," he said, changing the subject abruptly, and he gestured at a small suitcase against the wall. "I should've thought to save them for you."

"But... why were you burning them?" she asked, but read her answer in the look of anguish that flashed across his face, and she remembered how much it had hurt *her* to look at that half-burned scrap in the fireplace.

"Would you take care of Gabriel?" he asked quietly, rising to his feet and stepping away from her. "He's not really cut out to be an alley cat anymore."

It was then that Sarah knew that their visit — the last time she'd ever see him — was at an end.

"Sure," she choked, bending down to pick up the big cat. But when she straightened up again, Eric was gone.

An ugly sight, a man who is afraid.

— Jean Anouilh

"That's him! That's him!" Skank pointed one filthy, bloody finger at the face in the photograph — Hangman's Joke, it said, and the name under the face read: Eric Draven.

Skank looked awful — being shot and in two car accidents the night before had left his wiry body torn and limping; seeing the only man he dared to call friend blown up like a Fourth of July fireworks display had driven him into a gibbering panic; finding the author of all his misery in the photograph of a man he'd helped to kill a year earlier tipped him right over the edge.

"That's him — but he looked different! He was all painted up white like some kinda dead whore! I seen him." He limped and shuffled up and down the boardroom before the amused eyes of Top Dollar and Grange — two men who terrified him past what little reason he had left. "T-bird, he sent me in for some road beers, right. Then he took him away, man, and I chased 'em down. And he flash-fried T-bird to his fuckin' car..." He spun around in horror at the memory, lifting the whiskey bottle in his bandaged hand in salute to his chief: "Ah, T-bird! Here's to you, buddy!" And with a convulsive swallow he tried to drown his sorrows.

Top Dollar glowered at the frenetic antics of the animated piece of shit bleeding all over his boardroom floor — what a mess — first Gideon then this fuckhead. "I think we oughta just videotape this, play it back in slow motion," he said in disgust, wondering if they could get anything useful out of such a pitiful dipshit. Hell, *now* what was he doing?

"Fire it up! Fire it up!" Skank gave the old rallying cry, but his voice was hoarse, and without the others he sounded more foolish than menacing.

"Didya see the grave?" Top Dollar asked, one eye on the whirling dervish before him, one on his lieutenant.

"Empty," Grange said flatly, as if there had been no doubt... and after last night, there really hadn't been. Unfortunately, Skank heard him too.

"Grave! What grave? Wha' 'bout my fuckin' grave?" He hobbled desperately up to them, bringing his noisome body a

little too close for civilised comfort, and Grange shoved him casually back across the room.

"Three out of four," he said disgustedly. "He's working his way back to this speed freak right here." And probably doing them a favour at that.

But Skank felt the need to justify himself. "It's not fair! It was Funboy's fault. That boy was outta control! T-bird, he came in there, 'Waste 'em both'." But he missed the point entirely — they'd *all* been out of control that night! He began to sob noisily, shuffling up to them again, forgetting the risks that involved. "Now this ghost's gonna kill my ass next!"

Finally, completely out of patience, Top Dollar surged out of his chair to hit the smaller man with the punishing fist of a trained fighter. Skank staggered back against Grange, who thrust him into the seat Top Dollar had just vacated. But he proved that, while neither brave nor intelligent, he could absorb a helluva lot of punishment, as he cowered in terror, muttering through his sobs, "This ghost gonna kill my ass next... this ghost gonna kill..."

"Hey!" Top Dollar barked, shoving his angry face close to Skank's battered one. "That ain't no ghost!" No, not a ghost. Somebody was going to a lot of trouble to make it *look* like a ghost, but he knew there was a living, breathing, *mortal* human being behind all of this, and when the time came, he intended to prove just how mortal that man was — *nobody* took out his people and survived for very long!

"They have all arrived," Myca announced coldly, watching her brother closely. Now *she* might believe it was a ghost, but even if she was right, he'd still back the both of them against any man living... or dead.

"Watch him," he told Grange before leaving with Myca, "we might need him." Right now however, he had this year's Devil's Night to organise, and it was going to be *special*, "ghost" or no ghost.

So. He was a civilian again — for a while anyway — and he hated it. He felt naked without his badge and gun, wearing his uniform shirt stripped of all insignia, driving his own car... and on Devil's Night, of all nights!

"Looks like they skipped the school crosswalk, Annie," Albrecht muttered sourly to himself, as he drove through the neighbourhood, his cop's instincts keeping an eye out for trouble in spite of his current status. For that matter, there were a couple of less-than-legal firearms tucked away where he could get at them easily — another instinct that couldn't be shut off.

It was almost sunset, almost night. Almost Devil's Night. And he didn't like the edginess he was feeling. If only he were still on duty, had something he could concentrate on, instead of driving aimlessly around, looking for... what?

Looking for a ghost maybe? Yeah, maybe — a ghost who had more questions than answers; a ghost who was filled with more sadness than anger, and whose anger was enough to scour the earth. The ghost of an ordinary man... who was anything but ordinary now. It was confusing and depressing, and cops who let themselves become confused and depressed didn't survive very long.

Eric would be going after Skank next, if his guess was right... and he knew it was. Skank was the last... and the least... of the four who'd raped and beaten and finally murdered Shelly Webster, and he undoubtedly deserved everything coming to him, but Albrecht couldn't help thinking that it was a waste of effort. Skank was a cockroach and other feet would soon squash him out of existence, now that he no longer had the protection of his mentor, T-bird. Eric was no killer, in spite of last night's work, and Albrecht had sensed the creeping poison of this vengeance that was eating away his soul. It happened like that to cops sometimes... too often. All the violence, the suffering, the death and pain... they could kill as surely as a bullet to the heart.

But what effect would they have on a man already dead?

> The barb in the arrow of childhood suffering is this: its intense loneliness.
>
> **— Olive Schreiner**

Finally he spotted a familiar little figure sitting in her usual place at Mickey's counter and he pulled up to join Sarah. He wondered if she knew about her mother's boyfriend and the other strange and violent events of the night before, then shook his head ironically at the idea. Of course she did — kids in this neighbourhood absorbed gossip from the very air. She probably knew more than *he* did.

But did she know about Eric?

Well, whatever she knew, it was certainly depressing *her*, he thought, approaching the counter. She was sitting there all alone, except for a big white cat that she seemed to be sharing a hotdog with. She barely acknowledged his approach as she gloomily stroked the cat and stared blankly at nothing.

"He like his plain or with onions?" he asked, trying to tease her out of whatever it was that was bothering her, but it was like talking to a black hole. "Fine, *don't* talk to me," he said, pretending to be affronted, but looking at her with compassion. *And who am I to jolly anyone out of a depression?* But Sarah surprised him.

"When someone's dead, they can't come back, can they?" she asked, darting a quick glance at him, like she was ashamed to ask, but driven to it anyway by a confusion as deep as his own. He knew just how she felt, and he had a pretty good idea *why* she was asking.

"That's what I *thought*," he said cautiously, trying to give her the honest answer she deserved, hoping she'd trust him enough to be honest in return. "Are you referring to anyone in particular?" he asked, knowing that there was only *one* person who could've come back to see *both* of them. But he didn't want to pressure her — sometimes she was like a wild bird, trusting no one. And with good reason.

"You'll just think I'm nuts," she said tightly, shutting him out, taking wing away from him. *Poor Sarah*, he thought, *carrying all of this alone.*

"Yeah. Well then... maybe they'll have to lock us *both* up," he said quietly, not daring to speak too plainly in front of Mickey, but trying to tell her that they shared a strange and wonderful secret.

"You... see him too?" she asked almost fearfully, hunching her shoulders against a scornful reply, but almost ready to land on his outstretched hand.

"I saw... *somebody*," he acknowledged, one eye on her, the other on Mickey, busy behind the counter. But, now that it came right down to it, it was hard to admit what he knew was true — that the ghost of Eric Draven had stood before him with the voice and body of a living man. "Maybe it was your fairy godfather," he quipped, backing away from what he really wanted to say.

But Sarah heard the truth behind his words, saw it in his compassionate face, and sighed with a knowledge that wasn't any lighter for being shared. "Eric didn't come back for me," she said, cutting to the heart of the matter. "He can't be my friend anymore, because... I'm alive," she finished bitterly, and Albrecht had the awful feeling that she resented being alive as much as she did the loss of Eric's friendship.

"You want a friend to walk you home?" he asked soberly, knowing that she was going to need all the help she could get tonight. To lose Eric once was bad enough. Now she'd lost him again, and he was just as helpless in the face of her grief as he'd been a year earlier — once again he was going to have to take a lonely, empty little girl back to her lonely, empty little apartment, and leave her by herself... on Devil's Night.

He was more depressed now than ever.

Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.

— William Shakespeare

Help the living and you will bleed... Damn that crow! Eric thought, looking down from the roof over the loft at the tiny figure in the street below. Even at this distance he could see the dejection in her posture and feel the grief in her heart... and they hurt him, God, they hurt!

And yet, how could he have ignored her plea?... "I thought you cared". How could he have betrayed her yet again? She was just a child — a lonely, frightened child — he *had* to comfort her, to reassure her. He couldn't stop caring for her any more than he could still the beating of his heart.

And so he bled again — inside now, where it hurt more than a thousand razor cuts, and wounded him deeper than the unhealed slashes beneath the tape on his arms. And still, he'd had to send her away, to walk alone into the approaching night. Had he helped her? Had he done any good at all? Had the sacrifice of blood been enough?

Her mother had changed, was different... there was hope in that. *Everything's different*, she'd said, with a glow of wonder on her little face. There was still hope and promise and sunlight left in this shadowed, blood-drenched world after all.

But, oh, it hurt... it hurt.

There was a place to put the pain, he knew, and he lifted the stolen guitar again, cradling it in his arms, stroking the strings and letting them sing his ineffable sadness. And slowly the pain, and the memory of pain faded from his mind just as the light was fading from the day. And as the sky turned a sullen red under the dark clouds, the music changed. The grief was

drowned in rage; the tenderness fled, replaced by an angry, anguished electronic frenzy. The amps howled in an insane feedback and the air throbbed with murderous passion while his fingers did an inhuman devil's dance across the guitar strings, until the crow spread its wings in protest against the sheer savagery of the sounds lashing around them.

Then with a crash that shook the roof under his feet, the demonic music stopped as Eric smashed guitar, amps and everything, hurling them all off of the roof into the descending darkness.

Then he was gone, as the crow took wing again and led him into the night.

> The world...
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.
>
> **— Matthew Arnold**

The apartment was empty when Sarah got back, and she didn't even think anything of it, until its unnatural neatness finally registered on her awareness again. "'Back before dark', huh?" she muttered, hardly even disillusioned at her mother's absence. "Find another boyfriend already, *Darla*? Or another dealer, more likely."

Dispiritedly she sat down at the kitchen table and watched Gabriel prowl curiously around the apartment. *I'll have to get a sand box for him... and some food, that hot dog wasn't much*, she thought numbly after he'd finished his explorations and come back to meow plaintively at her. Without much hope, she started rummaging through the cupboards and was surprised to find them full of canned goods — there was enough there to feed both of them.

She felt a little better after eating, but the empty apartment seemed to haunt her even worse than the loft had — at least *Eric* had been in the loft. There was no one here except her and Gabriel... and too many broken promises.

Finally she couldn't stand it anymore. It was too much like last year — waiting alone for the Devil's Night fires. But this year she had no place to go, this year there was no Eric and Shelly.

But there hadn't been last year, either, she thought with a sigh, as she picked up Gabriel, her skateboard and the precious little suitcase full of mementoes of happier days — the only three things she cared about anymore.

Gabriel squirmed out of her arms the minute she got outside, and she was afraid at first that he meant to run away, maybe all the way back to the loft. But he just slipped into a sheltered shadow next to the building and sat down, calmly licking his fur.

"That's good, you wait for me there," she cautioned him. "You'll be safer out here, in case of a fire. I'll be back... after a while." But as she stepped onto her skateboard and pushed off into the damp darkness, she wondered why she should even bother. Oh, she'd come back for Gabriel, but what else was there for her? Not *Darla*, that was for sure, her and all her big talk about "waking up" and job interviews.

Everybody that I ever cared about has gone away and left me — my father, Darla, Shelly... Eric. But not this time. This time I won't let him! But even as she said that to herself, she knew it wasn't true, that she could do nothing to stop him. Didn't even *want* to, really — not if it meant keeping him away from Shelly.

If Darla had been home, had kept her promises, it would've been different. But she wasn't — everything else was different, after Eric, except *that*. Not even Eric could fix her mother.

It had stopped raining by the time she reached the old cemetery, silent as always in the shadow of the sad, abandoned cathedral. She hid the little suitcase in a sheltered corner, in case it started raining again, and looked carefully around. At least there weren't any fires yet... but it was still early, they'd be starting up soon enough. *Well, there's nothing to burn in here*, she thought, relaxing for the first time since she'd left the apartment, as the familiar, still peace of the graveyard surrounded her. For the first time she didn't mind being here

after dark... in fact, this was probably the only place left in the city that she wasn't afraid to be in now — she sure wasn't afraid of ghosts anymore. And besides, with the light from the street and surrounding buildings, it wasn't even all that dark.

Even so, she almost panicked when she saw what looked like a bulky figure kneeling in front of Eric's grave, and she froze in place for long minutes trying to figure out who — or what — it was. But the longer she looked, the less it looked like a figure. Cautiously she edged closer, as wary as the wild bird Albrecht likened her to, and as ready to fly away if danger threatened... but nothing happened. Nothing moved.

And finally she realised that it was nothing more than a big mound of earth, and the lid of a coffin that had pushed it up, with a gaping hole in the muddy earth looming before Eric's gravestone. In awe, Sarah knelt and touched the raw dirt and found the wilted rose that she had left the evening before. She remembered the crow, tap-tapping on the stone... waking Eric up even as she'd skated away from them.

With a thump, she sat down in front of Shelly's stone, staring at that miraculous, empty hole, remembering Eric as she'd seen him the night before... and only hours earlier.

"How did you do it?" she wondered, curling up against the chill of the night air. Too many questions, and none of the answers made any sense.

She snuggled deeper into her coat and yawned groggily — she hadn't gotten much sleep last night, and right now even the damp ground in front of Shelly's grave seemed inviting. She'd just rest her head for a minute... it was too cold to really sleep.

She yawned again.

> Now will I shortly pour out my fury upon thee, and accomplish mine anger upon thee; and I will judge thee according to thy ways, and will recompense thee for all thine abominations.
>
> **— Ezekiel 7:8**

He was running across the rooftops again, heading for Skank — who was with Top Dollar — and he gloried in his grace and strength. He heard the music coming from the Club Trash a block before he reached it, and he finally came to rest on a fire escape outside the bank of windows that lined Top Dollar's boardroom. Over the raw, rhythmic sounds coming from the club below, he could hear the murmur of voices from within.

"Well, boys," a deep voice rose over the babble coming out of the boardroom, stilling it. He heard footsteps crossing the room, and a whining whimper that could only be Skank. Tension washed over Eric — he never moved a muscle, but he went from waiting to *ready* in an instant — the stage was set and the last scene had finally begun.

"Well, boys... it seems our friend T-bird won't be joining us this evening, on account of a slight case of death," the leader announced sardonically to an appreciative ripple of laughter — *many* voices... too many? "Well, well, well. Devil's Night is upon us again. I thought we'd throw a little party, start a bunch of fires, make a little profit!" Eric shuddered at the words, thinking of the terrible fires that had ravaged the city for as long as he could remember — he and Shelly weren't the only ones to have suffered on Devil's Night.

"I like the pretty lights," a woman's accented voice purred into the silence following the man's words. And Eric went cold with a sick hatred — people had *died* in those "pretty lights". Then he blinked as the crow fluttered to a vantage point where it could see what lay within the room.

God! It was *full* of men! Dizzily, he tried to count them through the crow's shifting vision — there were at least two dozen! Could he fight *all* of them? Then he felt a hot exultation sweep over him as he marked all the men between him and his ultimate revenge, and he realised that he didn't *want* it to be easy! The fangs of his guilt ripped him more savagely than his anger, and without even realising it, he meant for these men to punish him for his failure to protect Shelly... even as he punished them for their sins.

He saw the leader — he knew him now — a man known in the neighbourhood only as Top Dollar. He was leaning forward, bracing himself on the table, raking everyone with his eyes. A woman stood beside him in a bizarre leather outfit, her heavy-lidded gaze contemptuous as she looked over her lover's minions.

And there was Skank, sitting at Top Dollar's right, looking half-dead already — he hadn't even cleaned himself up from last night, Eric saw with some satisfaction, noting the dried blood crusted on his pasty skin and the filthy, clumsily-tied bandages. Grange stood in back of him, almost pinning him to his chair.

There were other faces that he recognised — some of the worst criminal bosses in the neighbourhood (and thus the whole city) were there: drug lords, extortionists, gang bosses, arsonists, murderers... a distillation of all the evil in Top Dollar's evil empire. He would have to go through all of them to get to Skank... but somehow he didn't really care anymore.

Then Top Dollar straightened up and began to speak again, a frown of dissatisfaction twisting his face. "The problem is, it's all been done before, y'see what I'm sayin'?"

"That's no reason to quit," one of the others protested sullenly.

"Wrong! *Best* reason to quit... *only* reason to quit!" Top Dollar snarled.

To quit? What did he mean? The tension in the room suddenly jumped a hundred-fold. Why, if he stopped the Devil's Night fires, these men would mutiny, Eric could feel it. Well, that might make it easier to get to Skank... but it wasn't going to be that simple. Top Dollar was speaking again.

"A man has an idea. The idea attracts others, like-minded." He began to pace around the table, drawing every eye like a magnet, his voice intense and compelling. Everyone was confused, yet they couldn't help but listen. "The idea expands. The idea becomes... an institution!" He spun around to face them again. "*What* was the idea?" he challenged them, holding them spellbound like a TV evangelist.

"See, that's what's been bothering me, boys." Now his mood shifted from irritation to profound self-satisfaction. He leaned on the table, looking at them with his strange, reddish eyes. "But, I'll tell you, when I used to think about the idea itself, I'd put a big old smile on my face. You see, gentlemen: greed... is for amateurs!

"Disorder, chaos, anarchy... now *that's fun*!" His voice rose to a near-shout as Eric listened with a cold fury — for years this man had turned the city into a living hell... and he called it *fun!*

But his soldiers weren't impressed — they could care less about anarchy when there was money to be made. "What about Devil's Night?" one of them demanded sulkily.

"What about it?" Top Dollar dismissed the question. "I started the first fires in this god-damned city... before I knew it, every charlatan and shit-heel was imitating me!" Not that he'd ever allowed his "imitators" to get away with much, but still, it rankled.

Outside on the fire escape, Eric lifted his eyes and stared into the pulsing night. Soon. It would be soon now, and then the gnawing sense of incompletion that consumed him like a flame would be extinguished... along with all his enemies.

"Shit, you know what they got now?" Top Dollar snorted in disgust, sing-songing his answer: "'Devil's Night greeting cards'! Isn't that precious?" Obviously the idea nauseated him. He went on, quieter, even a little resigned: "The idea has become the institution, boys. Time to move along."

"You don't want us to do "light my fire" time for the whole city?" one of the soldiers asked nervously, and a subtle wave of rebellion rippled across the assembled men.

"No!" Top Dollar took their doubt and discontent and shaped it to his own ends, manipulating them all like a puppet master.

"No, I want you to set a fire so goddamn big the gods'll notice us again, that's what I'm saying!" His voice rose, pounding at them like a heavy sea. "I want all of you boys to be able to look me straight in the eye one more time and say '*Are we havin' fun or what?*'!"

He had them! The energy in the room poured into him, intoxicating him with its power. Suddenly he turned to the battered wreck next to him, shouting into his face with gleeful brutality, "Hey, you! What's-your-name, Skank? You don't feel that?"

Skank cowered away from the manic powerhouse confronting him, too terrified to even lie, "I feel like a little worm on a big fuckin' hook!" he gasped. It got a big laugh, but it was truer than any of the soldiers knew — Top Dollar *was* using Skank as bait... for Eric!

"'Feel like a little worm on a big fuckin' hook'," Top Dollar mocked cruelly, "Well, boy, your momma must be *damned* proud of you!" That got another big laugh, but it died away to murmurs when the crow fluttered out of the shadows to land in the middle of the table, and Eric moved silently and unseen into the room.

Skank recoiled, wailing piteously when he saw the crow — he knew all too well what it meant — but Top Dollar only frowned in irritation at having his joke spoiled. "How the hell did that thing get in here?"

"Gentlemen!" Eric's powerful, singer's voice boomed out of nowhere, startling Top Dollar's soldiers into red alert, scattering them back into battle formation. Suddenly two dozen deadly weapons were aimed at him as he stalked out of the shadows into the light — two dozen trigger-fingers held in check only by their obedience to Top Dollar. No one else moved except Skank, pinioned by Grange and howling in panic.

He was an eerie apparition as he advanced on them — from his tangled hair, to his dead-white face with its mocking black lips and eyes "like two holes burned in a blanket", to the tattered remnants of his performing clothes held together with black electrical tape, and Tin Tin's long coat billowing raggedly around him.

He still wore the heavy boots the crow had found for him, but he moved as lightly as an acrobat as he tossed aside the chair at the end of the long conference table and, in one fluid motion,

leapt up to sit cross-legged on its surface, challenging Top Dollar at the other end and mocking them all with a lunatic laugh.

In the waiting stillness, Eric and Top Dollar were the only ones who appeared to be at ease, but it was a sham, and tigers stalked the air between them.

Then Top Dollar spoke with savage mockery: "You're him, huh? The 'avenger', the 'killer of killers'? Nice outfit... I'm not sure about the face though," he sneered derisively, wagging an insolent finger at Eric's face.

Eric let the scornful words pass unheeded, while he pointed implacably at the cowering Skank, "I just want *him*." But he knew he would not be permitted to take Skank away so easily.

"Well, you can't *have* him," Top Dollar taunted, in a parody of a playground bully's sing-song. This was the worst way in the world to confront Top Dollar, challenging him in front of all his men, and they could all tell by the tone of his voice and the savagery of his expression that he was going to destroy this weird stranger.

But Eric wasn't disturbed at all. "Well," he said calmly, rising gracefully to his feet, weaponless and unafraid. He spread his empty hands as if offering a benediction and smiled grimly down the length of the table at his adversary. "I see you have made your decision. Now let's see you enforce it." And with those quiet words of defiance, he somehow *knew* that this man was the enemy he should have been pursuing all along.

For a second he stood, unmoving and passive before them, until even Top Dollar was unnerved into unleashing his hounds. "Ah, this is already boring the shit outta me. Kill 'im!"

At his words two dozen guns fired again and again. Bullets hammered at Eric's unresisting body, shaking it like a leaf in a hurricane. His face twisted in a rictus of shock as, for one terrible moment, the opposing forces of the crossfire actually held him upright. Then he fell backwards with a great crash onto the floor.

"Ooooh, that *had* to hurt!" Top Dollar quipped cruelly into the silence that rang as the last gun was stilled, pouring himself a drink so that he could savour the hot pleasure that always filled him after a good killing.

Bring me my Bow of burning gold,
Bring me my Arrows of desire,
Bring me my Spear — O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

— William Blake

And what of Eric? For five interminable seconds two dozen men had pumped bullets into him, turning his flesh into hamburger — had it been ordinary flesh, not even the crow and all the supernatural power in existence could have saved him... but it *wasn't* ordinary flesh, and the crow drew upon unimaginable energies.

For twenty seconds after Eric collapsed, a restless peace reigned. The men relaxed into a nervous disorder, still jumpy from the adrenaline rush. "That guy was *crazy*!" one of them said, voicing the unease they all felt, even as they congratulated themselves on having destroyed him... or so they thought.

Myca saw the crow, still standing patiently on the conference table, scanning them all with its wise eyes. She could feel the power emanating from it, and she hungered for that power as for a drug. Tense with determination she stalked the bird, reaching for it with a quick, convulsive movement... but it eluded her. With a contemptuous flirt of its wings it launched itself into the air, fluttering out of her reach. Her beautiful, exotic face twisted in rage at her failure, but at least those fools who looked to her brother had taken care of that other one.

But she was wrong — in those same twenty seconds, hidden in the shadows under the long conference table, Eric was being restored in ways none of them could imagine. Then, even as one of the soldiers walked arrogantly to the end of the table and bent down to look for him, Eric rolled away out of sight, snatching a gun as he went, as unnoticed as a pickpocket.

And by the end of those twenty seconds, Eric was not where they expected him to be. "He's *gone*!" The soldier gasped in disbelief, straightening up, his gun coming to the ready. But he never had a chance to complete the movement — a sharp crack shattered the restless silence as a bullet snapped his head back

and he dropped like a stone — and *he* didn't have flesh that could be healed... he was very simply *dead!*

There was horror and disbelief on every face at this grisly proof of Eric's resurrection, and all their bantering turned back to battle readiness in an instant. That one shot had started the firestorm all over again, but before they could even locate their elusive foe, another of their number was brutally cut down and his body dragged under the table.

> I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation that are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.
>
> **— Numbers 14:35**

All of Top Dollar's men began shooting wildly at the fugitive shadow, as Eric rolled through their bullets in a dizzying blur of motion. He finally bounded into view, firing furiously in every direction with two stolen guns, baring his teeth in a snarl of concentrated fury.

He danced through an incredible rain of bullets and yet kept on fighting. Whatever fear Top Dollar's men had felt at Eric's supernatural powers was forgotten as they did the only thing they really knew how to do — try to stop him with firepower, even as proof of the futility of their efforts stood invincible before them... and was shooting back!

A withering burst of fire struck him and spun him down again, and for an instant it almost looked like they'd gotten the better of him But the crow was a practised healer and he'd no sooner hit the ground than he was rolling over, firing back at his assailants with deadly precision. And anyone *Eric* hit, stayed down!

The crow was working so quickly now, that every bullet passing through him left healthy flesh in its wake and they slowed him no more than a hard-thrown snowball, and soon no more than a strong gust of wind.

He leapt easily back to his feet, firing his two guns indiscriminately at the men who still believed they outnumbered

him, steadily making his way to Skank, whose panicky shrieks gave away his position even over the roar of the gunfire. Then Skank found refuge of a sort behind two terrified women — expensive call girls who'd been part of the entertainment along with the liberal supply of drugs on the table, and who'd been too frightened to do more than cower on the sidelines.

Their shrieks joined Skank's as Eric flung away both his guns in a wide gesture and advanced on them, his eyes burning as he closed in on his prey — but they were in more danger from the panicking Skank than they were from Eric. Finally Skank's nerve broke and he bolted, shoving the girls into Eric's arms while he made good his escape.

Eric pushed them almost gently away, and saw them scurry to safety as he continued his relentless pursuit of Skank. No one could stop him, but they kept on trying anyway. None of Top Dollar's men gave a damn about Skank, but they weren't about to let Eric live if they could help it. Skank could've told them that they were too late — Eric was already dead... and so were they: If they shot at him, they didn't hurt him but when he shot them back... they died! If they hit him, he hardly felt it, but when he hit them back... they died!

Weaponless now, he broke one man's neck with a savage chop of his hand then flung him impatiently aside, grabbed the gun arm of a another and swung the blazing weapon onto a third, sending him crashing through the windows lining the room, then killed the gunman with a vicious slash from one of the many straight-razors littering the long table. With unconscious irony he whipped another man over the table right into the fire of his comrades.

He disdained their efforts, ignored the bullets, danced through the fire-storm like an demoniac acrobat; he became a mirror for their own viciousness — unchanged himself, he reflected it all back upon them. He used their own guns against them, and killed them with his bare hands, as all around him the bullets shattered glass and wood, destroying all the fine furnishings and the lamps overhead... and men died!

> I will make mine arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh.
>
> **— Deuteronomy 32:42**

Five men were making a desperate stand on the other side of the table as Eric, still unarmed, leapt onto its littered surface, then off again in a high, spinning somersault that an Olympic gymnast would have envied. He landed in the midst of the gunmen and snatched another fallen gun, their bullets disturbing him no more than a swarm of gnats. They scattered and died.

From Top Dollar's display case, Eric wrenched one of the murderous blades and cut down two more men who tried to close in on him, and slammed a third against the wall where he shattered and collapsed. Then, in a momentary lull in the killing frenzy that swirled around him, he told them what they should have figured out for themselves by now: "You're all going to die!"

With a gesture of cold disdain he tossed the sword aside and it came to rest point down on the conference table, directly over Skank huddling in terror beneath it. The room was in near darkness now, all the lights within burst and destroyed, lit only by the brilliant strobe-flash of gunfire from the few remaining fighters left alive and from the city-lights glowing through the long windows.

Two men rushed him from behind, but all Eric did was thrust out a hand and snare one as if he had eyes in the back of his head — which, with the crow, he did. The other man paused just a few feet behind Eric fumbling with his gun, but before he could do a thing, Eric had dropped to his back on the floor, swung his legs expertly over his head and booted him in the crotch so viciously that he flew backwards through the windows that overlooked the club below. When his glass-strewn body fell amongst the mindless dancers, a panic swept through them and their terrified screams rose in an eerie counterpoint to the battle raging above.

Snatching up two more guns from the dozens that now littered the floor, Eric again leapt onto the long conference table. From a balcony above him, stuttering flashes stitched a trail of extinction towards him, but he dodged it with an incredible back flip and ended up lying on his back ripping his assailant apart with stolen bullets. Then Eric was back on his feet before the man above had even finished dying and, with a ravenous snarl slashing across his blackened lips, strode down the long table blazing into the shadows that surrounded him.

One by one Eric slaughtered them, setting the night aflame with his wrath, destroying their lives as they had destroyed

countless others. They were all going to die: Top Dollar and Myca and Grange and all the nameless others, and Tin Tin and Funboy and T-bird... and Skank. They were all going to die and burn in hell, as *he* had been burning ever since he'd died a year ago.

In this blood-soaked ballet of death that Eric was choreographing, *nobody* was going to exit the stage... except through the Gates of Hell!

Finally the last soldier fell and the last gun stilled, and Eric was alone in the darkness, standing on the long conference table where he'd finished the battle. Except... he wasn't altogether alone.

In the club below, hundreds of patrons were still fleeing in panic from the sounds of gunfire and the bodies that had plummeted into their midst; approaching in the streets below, sirens wailed; and in the boardroom itself, little scuttling rat-noises told Eric that the final target of his vengeance still lived, still tried futilely to hide from him — for, even as every other man in the room had fought and died fighting, Skank had hidden and lived. Until now.

Grimly Eric stalked his prey, stepping the length of the table, crunching thousands of dollars' worth of drugs under his feet in a gritty punctuation to his search. Finally he paused before the sword, still standing where he'd tossed it only moments earlier. Below him, he knew without seeing, was Skank.

He grabbed the sword and with inhuman strength thrust it through the wood of the table and into the floor below, almost taking off the tip of Skank's nose in the process. Then he whipped down off the table to snatch the wiry little coward as neatly as a cat snatches a mouse flushed from cover.

"Guess it's not a good day to be a bad guy, huh, Skank?" Eric mocked coldly, holding him as implacably as Skank had held Shelly, wanting him to *know* what was coming.

But, alley rat that he was, Skank tried to divert Eric. "I'm not Skank! There's Skank right there." He slid his eyes to one of the bodies lying nearby. "Skank's dead!" he said slyly, as if that would have done him any good. Eric had already killed over two dozen men who weren't Skank — one more wouldn't have mattered.

Eric held him so close that he could smell the stench of terror on the little man, and as he looked into the filthy face before him, a memory superimposed itself before his eyes, of Skank holding Shelly down, his foetid breath making her gag, while the others ripped at her clothes.

The hands... the hands! They wouldn't let her scream...

"Skank's dead," the little man had said.

"That's right," Eric whispered, blinded by the memory and by the fury that burned red behind his eyes. With a spasm of unendurable agony he threw Skank bodily through the window, where he tumbled through a shower of blood-splashed glass to land in a lifeless heap on the roof of the first police car that was screaming to a stop in the street below.

This time Eric didn't bother leaving behind the outline of a crow — there was no one left who needed to see it. *Nobody got out of here alive tonight,* he thought sadly... *not even me.*

He was tired, and his mind was fading into blankness. The last one was dead, falling into the rain-swept night as *he* had fallen a year ago. The circle was complete, his work was done. The fire that had blazed so furiously within him was guttering into cold ashes. All he wanted to do now was find Shelly and rest. But, even as he gathered strength to leave this charnel house, filled with death and dark, half-sensed images of torture and despair, a squad of policemen burst into the room.

"Hold it!" one shouted as they deployed against him where he stood, unarmed and passive in front of the bank of windows he had thrown Skank out of. "That's all she wrote! Move and we shoot!"

Out of nowhere, Eric's forgotten sense of humour woke up for an instant, surprising him as much as the policemen: He raised his hands wide in meek submission... and danced sideways away from them in a heart-breaking parody of a soft-shoe routine.

He moved. They shot... no senses of humour at all, he gasped as the crow went into overdrive again. But this time he wasn't going to fight back, he wasn't going to hurt cops just trying to do their job. All he could do was try to get away.

He burst through the windows onto the fire escape where he'd sat no more than ten minutes earlier listening to the late Top

Dollar expounding to his late associates. But now there were dozens of cops out there and they were all shooting at him.

A single civilian car pulled up unnoticed as he staggered on the fire escape, and the man within it groaned at what he saw above him. *Dammit, can't you leave him alone? He's not shooting back! He doesn't even have a gun!* Albrecht thought impotently, but he knew the kind of panicked aggression that drove the men around him.

Eric broke away in a frantic flight, taking to the rooftops again, where nothing human could follow him. But a helicopter wasn't human! It came out of nowhere — all the manpower in readiness for Devil's Night concentrated on chasing down one lone man, unarmed, not threatening them, not even *alive*!

They were shooting at him! Was there no one in the city who wasn't trying to pump bullets into him? Eric wondered, racing in his desperate flight — dropping three stories to another roof level, somersaulting over obstacles, soaring over alleyways, but never quite able to evade the persistent helicopter.

Then he ran out of roof.

It was a terrible drop — forty, fifty feet — it was hard to tell in the darkness, but he never hesitated, leaping into the dark and giving all his trust to the spirits that guided him.

Halfway down, an awning broke his fall, then he landed bone-crushingly hard in a jumble of old packing cases and other alley trash, sending a dozing wino scampering for cover. But even as the crow strained to heal him, he struggled to his feet, looking back up at the helicopter vanishing overhead. Then they heard the squeal of brakes in the street beyond.

Ah no! More cops! Won't they ever *give up*? he thought despairingly.

But it wasn't more cops, it was just *one* cop, and he wasn't in a police car. "Come *on*! Move it!" a familiar voice commanded urgently as he looked dazedly over to see Albrecht throw open the door to his own car. He staggered out of the alley while the crow worked feverishly to repair the damage caused by that last terrible fall. He crashed into the side of the car with a groan as his ravaged body tried and failed to obey his mental commands; then finally, with a convulsive effort, he threw himself into the passenger seat, slammed the door shut beside

him and collapsed in exhaustion as Albrecht peeled out before the baffled helicopter pilot could figure out where Eric had disappeared to.

"My advice — next time, *duck!*" Albrecht said, trying to cover his concern with a joke, but Eric only sat slumped in the seat next to him, unmoving and unspeaking as his body was being restored, and the wail of sirens echoed around them.

"So many cops, you'd think they were giving away doughnuts," Albrecht went on, still trying to tease Eric into some kind of response, or maybe just to cover his own nervousness. He couldn't have left Eric alone and helpless on the street, and yet it was hard for him to go against his own people like this and help him escape.

The same thought occurred to Eric finally, as his exhaustion drained away and the mists in his brain cleared. And when a screaming police car zoomed across an intersection in front of them, forcing Albrecht to come to a screeching halt, he threw open the door and leapt from the car before it had even stopped moving, leaving nothing behind but a draft of damp October air and the sound of his running feet fading into the distance.

Albrecht looked at the blood-stained seat where Eric had been and muttered in weary disgust, "I *knew* you were going to do that." But at least Eric was free now... yes, free and finished with the grisly task he'd set for himself.

"Rest in Peace, friend," he murmured, reaching over and pulling the car door shut. "Rest in peace."

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; th' unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate.

— John Milton

A luxurious car purred over the pavement of a bridge, sheltering the three within from the wet night that surrounded it. Below them, the city was quiet... and dark.

"Look at that out there — the whole city oughtta be in flames by now," said the long-haired man sitting in the back seat, in tones of mortal offence. "The sky oughtta be red!" This was *his* night — Top Dollar's own Devil's Night, and one man had stopped him... one *dead* man.

"So that, I take it, was the late, great Eric Draven," Grange said, unperturbed by man or ghost. He'd seen enough of Draven to know that firepower wasn't going to stop him for long, but he'd believed him when he said he only wanted Skank. So, when Myca had signalled to him for a strategic withdrawal, he'd gathered her and Top Dollar and hustled the three of them out of the boardroom before things got really hot — anybody that could come up shooting after that first volley was more than a match for all the soldiers Top Dollar or anybody could muster.

From a safe vantage point they'd watched Draven dispatch all of them, right down to that speed freak, Skank, and then begin his flight from the cops, who even now were probably having the time of their lives going through Top Dollar's lair... or at least they would until Torres started earning his pay and called them off. Until then, there were safe houses outside the city, new soldiers to recruit, and an empire to re-establish. A "no-show" of the Devil's Night fires was the least of the problems facing them. And Eric Draven might still be worst of them.

"He has power," Myca hissed, stroking the single black feather which was the only part of that damned bird she'd been able to grab. "But it is power you can *take* from him."

"I like him already," Top Dollar chuckled, greedy for the kind of power he'd seen Draven using against him. Grange thought about that — as little as he cared to face Draven in his strength, he'd love to steal as much as he could from him and *then* see who was a match for whom.

"The crow is his link between the land of the living and the realm of the dead," Myca went on in her sultry, accented voice, although how she knew such things, Grange didn't like to contemplate.

"So, kill the crow," he said speculatively, "and destroy the man." That sounded like a simple, straightforward approach and it appealed to him — leave all the convoluted subtleties to Myca. "Now all we have to do is find him."

"He will return to his grave... but he will not answer your challenge. He does not want us. We must find a way to bring him to us."

"Oh, I'm sure we'll think of something," her brother drawled confidently.

"I underestimated the Watcher. I will not do so again — you will have your revenge, my darling," she smiled, taking his face in her hands and kissing him deeply, moaning a little as his hands moved roughly over her body. In the driver's seat, Grange focused his eyes on the road ahead and avoided looking into the rear-view mirror. It would take about fifteen minutes to drive back to the old neighbourhood, time enough for the two in back to finish what they were starting.

Ah! when will this long weary day have end,
And lend me leave to come unto my love?

— Edmund Spenser

After Eric bailed out of Albrecht's car, the crow led him on a roundabout path through the dark alley-ways, eluding the police, until they finally emerged onto a quiet street far away from the wail of sirens and the flash of lights. But he was so tired — all he could think about now was Shelly. Which was all right — better than thinking about T-bird and his crew. Better than thinking about what he'd just done.

He began to feel a growing discomfort and realised that it came from Tin Tin's coat: the once elegant leather garment was cut and torn, full of bullet-holes and stained with blood — it was a murderer's coat, and Eric was done with murderers now. He shook it off with a shudder of distaste. His own clothes were in just as bad a state, but soon he would have no need for them.

He was just so *tired*. He paused next to some heavy scaffolding and leaned against the sturdy iron, resting his head wearily on his arm. They had hurt him, those men, but nothing they had done to him had hurt as much as knowing he had failed to protect Shelly. And he had hurt them, but their pain did nothing to ease his own... but what did it matter anymore? Yes, he was done at last with murderers. "Coming home, Shelly," he whispered sadly, as tears trickled down his cheeks. Soon... soon...

Then, from the gloom ahead of him came the incongruous sound of young people's laughter, and the bobbing forms of costumed youngsters came into view under the scattered street lights. Crazy kids, to be out like that on Devil's Night. But there weren't any fires yet, and maybe they were too high on something to care. Whatever. They were happy, that was for sure, maybe the only happy people in the whole city, dancing and laughing, seeing in Eric's painted face a kindred spirit. Maybe it was all bravado, thumbing their noses at Devil's Night, but Eric didn't care — he laughed with them, thumbing his nose at Death itself.

But there was too much pain in that laughter. He couldn't really mock Death and come away unscathed. He had done what he'd come back to do and nothing important had really changed — Shelly was still dead, he was still dead, life was going to move on without them, and he didn't know what lay beyond. He couldn't even be sure that he'd ever be able to find Shelly again. He wasn't running anymore, or leaping like a gymnast; even the crow seemed hard-pressed to keep him going. He was walking like an old man — it was going to take him a long time to get to the old ruined church, but he had time after all.

He had all the time in the world.

Hush! my dear, lie still and slumber,
Holy angels guard thy bed!
Heavenly blessings without number
Gently falling on thy head.

— Isaac Watts

It *was* too cold to sleep, but Sarah fell asleep anyway — she was too worn out to stay awake. And anyway, it was better than sitting up wondering what Eric was doing, and if he was safe (but how could a ghost *not* be safe?), and watching for the fires to start. So she slept, right there on top of Shelly's grave, next to the muddy hole that had been his. He'd told her himself that he'd come looking for Shelly as soon as he finished with Skank, and where else would he look for her except here?

It was quiet there in the old graveyard — the sounds of the city crept lightly around the sleeping stones, never awakening the sleeping child. A few miles away there was noise aplenty — the loudest of bands, and then even that was drowned out by gunfire, and finally the ever-present wail of police sirens — but only the faintest echoes of all that reached among the sleeping souls, disturbing none of them, living or dead.

No rain fell to chill her into wakefulness, no fires were lit, no sirens screamed. Occasionally the breeze lifted a few leaves over her still form, or the moon, looking briefly through shifting windows in the clouds, washed her in a swift pale light, but she never knew of it, and she didn't awaken.

She never saw the slender figure, all in black and white like clouded moonlight, walk as silently as moonlight and as wearily as time through the iron gates and hesitate, seeing her before him — one last mission of conscience between him and his heart's desire.

She didn't see him kneel by her tucked-up feet with an expression of weary affection, or the fond quirking of his lips as he reached for one of those feet, but she felt his fingers

there, and felt the gentle wiggle he gave it, and she woke up suddenly to see him squatting on his heels, looking at her with sweet, sad reproach.

"You're gonna say I shouldn't be in a cemetery in the middle of the night, right?" she said defensively, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. *As if that makes any difference*, her expression told him.

"Safest place in the world to be," he said, with gentle irony.

"It's 'cause everybody's *dead*," she agreed, trying to match his wry tone, but only telling him that she preferred *them* to the living. "I *knew* you'd come here," she went on intently, begging him for something they both knew he couldn't give her.

"It's really late, Sarah," he said, and his words were like a door slamming in her face.

"You didn't say goodbye," she accused him unfairly, despair making her sullen; and even she didn't know if she meant that afternoon... or a year ago.

"You're just going to have to forgive me for that," he said patiently, his grey eyes dark with compassion — there would *never* be time enough for this kind of goodbye.

"And you're *never* coming back?" she asked miserably, knowing the answer as well as he did, hating herself for asking it, hating the answer she knew he had to give.

But he didn't answer. Instead, he reached behind his neck and untied the leather cord he wore and brought it forward to show her the delicate filigreed circlet suspended from it.

"I gave this to Shelly once," he said sadly, smiling past it into her eyes, then he bent towards her and tied it carefully around her own slender neck. "I think she'd like *you* to have it. This way you'll always remember her," he whispered lovingly, and his voice caressed all their memories of Shelly — shared and unshared — as he reached and caressed her with his hand.

She leaned into his palm like Gabriel begging to be petted, but Gabriel had never looked at him with such aching unhappiness. "I'll... never take it off," she choked, her voice breaking at last on the rocks of *must* and *have-to*. Blindly she reached for

him, hungry for love and hope and trust and a thousand other things she'd been starved for all her short life.

But all he could give her was one brief hug, one fierce grasp, his bloodied fingers tight on her jacket, clutching it as if he were drowning. Then he opened his hands and dropped his arms away from her, looking at her miserable little face with a grief surpassing her own. But he couldn't stay, and she couldn't go with him.

> Parting is all we know of heaven,
> And all we need of hell.
>
> **— Emily Dickinson**

"I better go sneak back in the house," she muttered, standing up and turning away from him so he wouldn't see her tears as she walked away. How could she leave him, how could she give up the only family she'd ever known, ever wanted?

But how could he stay? And how could she keep him away from Shelly. She'd said it to Albrecht — she was alive and Eric was... dead. And all she had of him was this last goodbye.

But, as if she were tied to him by a leash, she came to a halt after just a few reluctant steps and turned back for one more look at him, hoping beyond hope that he had some magic or secret power to change what had to be. But there was nothing in his face except desolation, and his whole body shook with the effort to contain his sorrow. Suddenly she felt terribly guilty for causing him so much pain.

"Bye," she whispered, knowing of nothing that could comfort either of them, except to go away and leave him alone. He couldn't even answer her, couldn't find the words for an unhappiness beyond words, and finally she tore herself away from his sad grey gaze and walked dejectedly away from him, leaving him alone with Shelly at last.

Her steps were shuffling, as if she didn't trust her feet to find their way safely across the ground, and her head was down, not daring to look more than a few feet ahead in time or space. She was trying not to think; she was trying not to feel; but all

she knew was that nothing in her life had ever hurt as much as *this.*

I shouldn't have come, she thought, in spite of her efforts not to think. *It hurts too much*, she felt, in spite of her efforts not to feel. *Ah no, I'm tough. I can take it,* she told herself, as she'd told herself so many times in the last year... but this time, she didn't even try to believe it.

And so she shuffled despondently through the iron gates and past the wide steps leading to the great cathedral doors, heading for the street that would take her away from Eric forever, never looking up from her feet.

But even if she *had* looked up, she never would have seen the silent shadow watching for her, never would have heard the stealthy approach behind her. She knew nothing of the man who stalked her until his cunning hands muffled her startled cries as he snatched her effortlessly off the ground, and carried her swiftly through a side door into the vast and echoing nave of the abandoned cathedral.

"Shhh, shhh," a velvety voice admonished her, while she squirmed and protested in his grasp, "Take it easy, sweetheart." But she was too frightened to understand his words, all her grief forgotten in the face of this unexpected assault. His fingers cut off her breath, and his arm crushed her ribs; she hurt only herself in her struggles against him, but sheer claustrophobic panic drove her to fight him anyway.

He carried her deep into the centre of the church, fitfully lit by a few scattered candles and the streetlights outside, and set her on her feet in front of a long-haired man and an oriental woman, his hands heavy on her shoulders, still imprisoning her. She felt like a baby mouse trapped between three hungry cats.

The woman stepped forward, studying Sarah with pitiless eyes... eyes which were immediately drawn to Shelly's ring. She lifted the precious gold circlet in careless fingers, defiling it by her very touch, but Sarah was too terrified to protest. Then the woman looked back at the man with her, and Sarah followed her glance... and her heart almost stopped.

It wasn't that she recognised him — she'd never seen him before — but she'd heard all her life of the man with the nose like an eagle's beak, hair like a dark curtain and the body of a trained warrior, who was never seen without the mysterious oriental

woman called Myca, who was his constant companion, or Grange, the clever black man who was his chief lieutenant. She didn't know his real name, but on the streets he was known as Top Dollar, and he was king in the kingdom of evil that had run this town since before she was born.

And he had taken her! Sarah didn't know why, or how he'd come to this place, or what he wanted with her. All she knew was that *this* hungry cat was the deadliest of tigers, and the look in his eyes burned her like fire.

When he saw the little ring that Myca held up for him he lifted his eyebrows in an unspoken question. Something in her glance must have told him the ring was important because he turned his attention back to Sarah with a cruel smirk.

"What's that? Some sort of souvenir there, from your pal?" he said sardonically, as he snapped the cord ruthlessly from her neck. "I'll just keep it for good luck, whaddya say?"

Her neck still smarting from the cord, she could only stare at him in frozen terror and say nothing, weeping inside over the loss of Shelly's ring. All her street kid's defiance shrivelled to nothing before the threat of his heartless smile as she realised that she wasn't as tough as she thought she was... or needed to be.

Then Myca stepped between them again and stroked Sarah's face with a glossy black feather, looking deep into her fear-dilated eyes, smiling so strangely at what she saw that Sarah could barely breathe. She tried to draw away from that baleful look, but only drove her head back against Grange's unyielding chest.

"Her eyes... are so innocent," the woman hissed in her dark accented voice, and Sarah saw death looking at her through those black almond eyes.

It shocked her out of her terrified immobility. "Eric! *Eric!*" she yelped before Grange's hand closed over her mouth again, but it wasn't enough, she knew. Eric was too far away, there was too much stone and space between them — he could never hear her.

But now that she'd begun to fight them, she couldn't stop. Almost mindlessly she struggled as Grange swiftly tied her wrists together and Myca began dragging her up a tight twisting stairwell. For a second, by a broken window, the woman's grasp slipped and she was able to cry out Eric's name again, calling

uselessly for his help, but then a gag was bound around her mouth and she was forced higher and higher up the steps.

"Good," Myca said in a strange voice, as she forced Sarah to hurry up the stairs. "He hears... and he comes." What did she mean? Eric? No, that was impossible — *nobody* could hear her up here, and the woman had no way of knowing *what* Eric was doing. He was probably in heaven with Shelly by now... and she was the prisoner of a crazy woman.

Finally they stopped, so dizzyingly far above the ground that the bottom of the stairwell was lost in darkness, and Myca tied her firmly to one of the support posts before hurrying down the steps, leaving her alone in the dark. Desperately she strained against the ropes, scraping her wrists raw. But all her efforts were useless — she couldn't get free, and she couldn't make any more noise over the gag than the frightened, trapped mouse she knew she was.

A cold draft swept through the tower, carrying the scent of rain, and lightning etched the cracks in the boarded-up windows around her, followed a few seconds later by the ominous rumble of thunder. Then all was silent again, and Sarah sobbed in fear. By now, Eric was gone and she was more alone than she'd ever been in her life.

They were going to kill her — she'd seen it in their eyes. But she'd seen also the promise of something even worse planned for her, and she was afraid that dying was going to be the easiest thing they would force upon her.

At least dying would take her back to Eric.

The thunder sounded again, a little closer, and rain began hissing down onto the stones of the old cathedral. There was no other sound from below, no other sound except her own heart pounding against her ribs, and her own breath sobbing around the cruel gag in her mouth. No other sound...

Then a shot exploded far below her, its echoes ripping through the still air — a shot, and voices, muffled by distance, and she knew somehow that her own life or death were being decided down there by people she didn't know, in ways beyond her understanding.

Another shot stunned her with its echoes, and she wailed in mindless panic as she jerked against her bonds, soaking the

ropes around her wrists with her own blood. And from below came the sound of more and more gunfire.

> For blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.
>
> **— Numbers 35:33**

Eric! Help!

The image struck him like a blow: Sarah, wild-eyed and terrified, being dragged away by a creature that radiated evil! Where was she? What was happening to her? Who had taken her?

He had been kneeling before Shelly's grave, Sarah's little offering of flowers in his hand, as he reached yearningly to trace the beloved name carved in the stone. But through the crow's now-familiar skewed perspective he was blasted with that vision of horror — Sarah was in danger!

Forgetting all his fatigue, he leapt to his feet with a speed and grace that would have astonished him if he'd spared a second to think about it... but there were no seconds to spare.

[Help the living and you will bleed.]

Eric batted the words away like Tin Tin's knife, never pausing. "I know that," he panted. "I'll bleed if I have to."

[They can keep you from finding Shelly.]

That made him hesitate, but only for an instant. "I'll have to chance it — she wouldn't have me anyway, if I left Sarah. Are you with me?" he growled, ready to go in alone, to lose Shelly, to risk his immortal soul if that was what he had to do to save the child who was the daughter of his heart.

[I am with you, warrior.]

The great cathedral doors *boomed* through the vast emptiness as Eric wrenched them open and strode grimly down the central aisle, warily searching the shadows around him while the crow scouted on ahead. The grumble of thunder from the breaking storm filled his ears, and the roar of the heavily falling rain drowned all other sounds. All he was aware of now was whatever the crow saw... and the crow saw nothing. Their enemies were too well hidden, and they stood between him and Sarah, armed to the teeth with guns and blades and Myca's tainted magics.

Suddenly Eric stopped, alerted by a tiny sound to his right. Then he saw Grange pointing one of his deadly toys at him, and he flinched when a brilliant red light lanced out from it, realising that it had some kind of laser targeting device on it. But before he could react, Grange swung the gun so that the glowing red dot came to rest... on the crow!

A single shot exploded into the silence and the crow was blown off of its perch in a flurry of feathers to fall in a pitiful red and black heap on the floor. Eric staggered, jolted through his link with the bird, and spun around to face the man who stepped complacently out of the shadows.

It was Top Dollar... still alive, still deadly, and in a killing rage!

Eric was beyond hope now, shaken and vulnerable, facing Top Dollar with nothing and no one to help him, while his link to the crow was shattered and the crow's delicate little body was beyond even its supernatural power to heal. He was lost now — no rest, no peace, no Shelly... and no way to save Sarah!

Help the living and you will bleed... but he'd never meant for the crow to bleed for him.

Top Dollar smiled cruelly at him, savouring the moment. "Quick impression for you," he said lightly, curling his lip at Eric standing quietly and empty-handed before him. Then he made "wings" with his hands, "flapping" them derisively. "Caw, caw! Bang! Fuck! I'm dead!" he laughed, throwing his hands down and planting them on his hips as he stared triumphantly at Eric.

But Eric ignored his mockery, giving no indication that he was disturbed by it, or even by the attack on the crow that Top Dollar was parodying. "Give me the girl and I'll let you walk

out of here," he said in a quiet voice. With or without the crow, he would not give up.

Top Dollar looked almost like he might be seriously considering the idea. "Well, well. Why don't you just gimme a minute to think about that, huh?" He turned his back on Eric and walked a few steps away.

Eric didn't believe him for one minute, but that didn't concern him right then, because he *felt* something, and *saw* something that gave him renewed hope: the crow was fluttering desperately on the floor, still alive after an assault that should have blown it into bloody shreds. And it was getting better! If only he could stall for a little while, if only he could give the crow enough time to heal itself.

But Top Dollar wasn't about to give him any time at all. "Nah, fuck it!" he said eagerly, drawing a gun and turning to face his Nemesis. With an exultant snarl he fired at Eric, hitting him in the shoulder. The force of the bullet ripped him back, half spinning him around and he staggered helplessly before its killing force. This time there was no protective link, there was no healing, there was nothing but bullet-torn flesh and a shattering agony.

With trembling fingers, Eric touched his bleeding shoulder. "Aw, fuck!" he whispered in helpless fury, then his legs crumpled under him and he stumbled backwards, tripping on the chancel steps and falling heavily to the floor.

"Well, well, well," Top Dollar gloated arrogantly. "It does seem to me that our little life has undergone a rather significant change in the last few minutes, wouldn't you agree?" Then he launched his fist at Eric, smashing it into his face with bone-shattering force.

Eric's unresisting body was thrown against the steps by Top Dollar's merciless fist, then he rolled back down to land helpless and groaning against his enemy's feet. Top Dollar leaned over Eric, lifting his hair to peer at his wounded shoulder. "Well, for a ghost, you bleed just fine!" he said in disgusted disappointment — he'd obviously hoped for more of a fight from Eric. He stepped away and Eric rolled brokenly down the last of the chancel steps to lie in a crumpled, impotent heap.

Hazily, he heard Grange call out, "It's still alive!" *What* was still alive? he wondered sluggishly and he heard Top Dollar answer him impatiently.

"Well, then *kill* it!" Kill what? Then he knew — kill the crow! No, no! Leave it alone! But he couldn't do anything except writhe in agony on the cold stone floor, trying futilely to gather enough strength to just get to his feet again.

He heard Grange mutter callously, "Bye-bye, birdie," as he swung his laser sight onto the struggling bird; and he knew that there was nothing he could do to save his injured companion.

Suddenly his eyes were dazzled by a brilliant flare which seared across the darkened nave and landed in a burst of flames against the pillar behind Grange. In an instant all hell broke loose as a darting, dodging figure came out of nowhere and began shooting at Grange and Top Dollar, distracting them from the crow and Eric.

But not distracting them enough — Top Dollar spun around, sparing a second to shoot at Eric. But Eric was on his feet at last — the crow had managed to channel him enough healing force to get him moving again. But was it going to be enough? Would he be able to escape Top Dollar's fury.

Top Dollar kept trying to shoot him, even as he battled the other unknown assailant, and all Eric could do was throw himself recklessly behind whatever pitiful shelter he could find, gasping in agony, barely holding on to consciousness throughout it all. He *knew* how vulnerable he was now, wounded and unarmed, impotent against his powerful enemies, with someone he loved in their hands and out of his reach. It was altogether too much like that night in the loft, and the terrible parallels paralysed his mind — he was terrified he was going to fail Sarah as he had failed Shelly.

Only, it wasn't the same — this time he had help! This time he had the crow (who was injured) and he had an ally who was shooting back at Top Dollar and Grange (and whose identity was still a mystery). *Some help!* he thought breathlessly as he dived for shelter behind a row of pews, cringing as Top Dollar's bullets ripped through the wood over his head, then he gasped in horror as he caught a glimpse of movement overhead and realised that Grange had a clear shot at him.

There was no time to move or roll away as he stared down the barrel of Grange's gun knowing he couldn't survive another bullet as long as the crow was injured — he would be spun away into limbo, and Sarah and Shelly would be lost to him forever. Still, he tried — he rolled, knowing he couldn't reach cover in time, and flinched as shots rang out over his head, expecting to feel the by now all-too-familiar impact of bullets in his flesh — bullets that he could no longer shrug off like pinpricks.

But there was no impact. Instead, the crash of a heavy body falling told him that Grange was the one who was hit, not himself. He kept rolling, dodging Top Dollar's lethal gunfire while his unknown ally laid down a barrage that was just as lethal. For a few precious seconds he rested, trying to gather strength for his next move. Suddenly a dismayed "Caw" cut through the sound of gunfire and he shuddered in helpless anger as he *felt* Myca snatch the crow up and carry it away.

Oh no! Not the crow too! he gasped, struggling to follow her as she fled up the stairs with Top Dollar.

[Wait. She will not harm me. And she does not know what she holds.]

Wearily, he agreed, sagging against a pillar then shrank back when a figure appeared out of the shadows, darting cautiously to his side, careful to stay under cover. Then he relaxed when he recognised his unknown ally — it was Albrecht!

The policeman was dishevelled and panting when he dropped down next to Eric, but an eager light of battle was in his eyes, and he was even smiling grimly as he began checking his shotgun. "Aw shit!" he grunted when he discovered he was out of shells, voicing his opinion of the whole situation. "Well, just came by to pay my respects, and here you are getting all shot up again. I've called for back-up. I can hold 'em here while you get outta sight." He sounded almost happy, and maybe he was — he finally had a chance to take out the criminals who had made his life — and life in the neighbourhood — hell for so long.

But Eric dampened his enthusiasm for the fight with just three forbidding words: "No time. They've taken Sarah," he panted, pain and worry making his voice rough. Suddenly Albrecht was all cop and all business.

"How many?" he growled, knowing that his worst fears for her safety had been realised.

"Two more," Eric gasped in pain when he tried to shift his position, but he belied his helplessness to go on confidently, "I can handle it, don't worry." It was a lie, but at least it reassured Albrecht.

"I'm not worried," he said, almost jauntily. "Look, here's the plan: You stay in front and when they run out of ammo, I'll arrest them." Eric smiled inwardly at that image and wondered if Albrecht had seen the boardroom after he'd left it. But he doubted if Top Dollar and Myca would be easy to arrest even after they'd been disarmed.

"That sounds like a *great* plan," he said wryly, then his voice turned bitter, "There's just one problem," and he lifted his hand away from his wounded shoulder, distressed to see that he couldn't stop it from trembling.

"Shit!" Albrecht groaned in dismay as he reached out, then drew back before he actually touched the mangled flesh. "You're bleeding all over the place!" He looked hard at Eric — when he'd picked him up after that apocalyptic bloodbath at Top Dollar's, he'd been in a bad way... now he looked even worse. "I thought, y'know, you were *invincible!*" he said, almost reproachfully.

"I *was*!" Eric snapped irritably, angry at his helplessness in the face of Sarah's danger. "I'm *not* any more!"

Albrecht sighed, depressed by the odds facing them. "Well, I guess you really *will* need my help, won't you? C'mon." He helped Eric to his feet, trying to ignore his groans and gasps of pain.

High above them Sarah writhed against her bonds, terrified by the gunfire that echoed below her, then even more terrified by the silence that followed it. Then she heard the hurrying feet climbing the stairs and her heart nearly stopped.

Maybe it's Eric, she thought wildly, grasping at hope even though she knew there wasn't any to be had. It wasn't Eric, it was *them*, as she'd known it would be. Top Dollar untied her from the newel post and imprisoned her with a rough hand.

"I want him," Myca hissed, and Sarah quailed when she realised the woman had to mean Eric.

"He's yours," Top Dollar smiled sardonically, handing her his gun. "You take that," he whispered, then kissed her with carnal abandon while he held Sarah close to him with one hand. "I'll be

back" he promised as he lifted Sarah carelessly and started up the stairs with her. Looking over his shoulder, she saw Myca starting cautiously back down.

Look out, Eric! She's coming, she thought dizzily, her skin crawling at Top Dollar's touch, praying that Myca wouldn't hurt him.

But it was a vain hope. Sarah jerked in Top Dollar's arms when she heard the shots and he paused, swinging her around so they could both watch the gun battle going on below them. "Pretty careless about your continued good health," he muttered when a bullet *whinged* by them, but she knew that Myca had fired first and Eric was only trying to defend himself.

Then she heard a cry from below and the sound of a heavy body falling down the steps.

"So much for your pals," Top Dollar gloated. "And Myca's got that bird, so that just leaves you... and me." He ran a finger lightly down her face, smiling with sensual anticipation when he saw how even that slight touch repelled her. "Whaddya say we play a little game?"

But Top Dollar was wrong.

It had been Albrecht who fought with Myca, climbing the steps and firing at the shadowy figure above him, while Eric fought his own battle against the weakness of his body. And it was Albrecht who was shot, with a bullet meant for Eric. He staggered back down the steps, losing his gun God-only-knew-where in the shadows, and slumped against the wall of the tower, a stricken look on his face.

Eric moved painfully to his side. "You were *supposed* to stay behind me," he chided gently, but his light words couldn't mask the concern in his voice.

"I think I messed up," Albrecht gasped, his breath coming fast and shallow, his eyes wide with fear as he tried to figure out how badly he was hurt. He felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest, but the worst of it was knowing that Sarah was in the hands of those two murderous psychos up there and he couldn't do another thing to help. It was all up to Eric now, except the bullet hole in his shoulder proved that he was altogether too "vincible" to do much good.

Slowly, heavily, every step taking all his strength, Eric climbed the stairs to where Myca waited for him, the crow in one hand, her deadly gun in the other. He didn't even know what he was going to do when he reached her, only that if she shot him again this body would fail him, and his soul... he didn't know what would become of his soul. But he could guess the kind of fate that awaited Sarah with Top Dollar and he would willingly risk his body and his soul, his hopes of reaching Shelly and anything else he had, to save her.

[Wait. Be still.]

Eric paused below Myca, obeying that unspoken command, half leaning on one of the corner posts, panting from his exertions. Exhaustion etched his face as he looked up at her, but an intense determination challenged the gun she pointed at him.

She glanced down at the crow, quiet in her delicate grasp, and smiled triumphantly. "This is *all* the power you ever had. Now, it is mine." She looked at Eric, helpless and unarmed, like a sacrificial victim before her, and she dropped her eyelids in sensual regret.

"Pity there is not more time... for us." Then she lifted her gun, aiming straight for Eric's eyes. And still he didn't move, he just stood there slumped against the post, watching her through a damp tangle of hair, his grey eyes dark with hatred.

But the crow had not been waiting without reason or purpose. It had taken nearly every bit of its supernatural power to keep it and Eric "alive" and to finally begin healing them. Even so, neither of them were restored to anything like their full strength yet, and so they had to wait until the last possible moment to act, wait until Myca relaxed her hold on the crow, just enough...

It was a big bird and a strong one when it had to be, and now it had to be as never before in its existence. It hated this woman, and knew well how to make its attack — a crow's ancient instinct is to go for the eyes, and Myca's eyes were only inches away from its wicked beak.

The crow dug its claws fiercely into her flesh and buffeted her mercilessly with its powerful wings, stabbing at her face again and again with a two-inch long beak that was as hard as iron and as sharp as one of her own knives.

Her screams shocked every one of them that could hear — except Eric. He knew what this woman had done to Sarah and sensed through his link with the crow what she'd planned to do to her, and his only emotion as he watched the crow destroy her was regret that he wasn't the one doing it.

In a cold rage he watched her stagger blindly, breaking through the rotted railing. Her flailing hands found the old bell-rope and she clung there swaying for a moment, tipping the sweet-voiced bell above them to ring her death-knell. And then she fell, still screaming, to her doom in the shadows below, and he wasted even less pity on her than she'd shown Sarah. Now there was only Top Dollar... and Top Dollar had Sarah. But he was strong again — strong enough, at least, for this. If he wasn't already too late.

He almost was.

Top Dollar cursed when he first heard the screams, knowing from the sound of them that something had gone terribly wrong. He didn't even need the sound of her fall to tell him Myca was gone — the silence was enough. He looked down to see Eric slowly climbing the stairs after him, then he dragged Sarah over and dangled her perilously over the shaky railing.

"Here she is, ghost," he jeered, then darted his eyes around the bell tower, looking for the best place to make his stand. He'd given his last gun to Myca and all he had was the sword scabbarded on his back, but this twisting stairwell was no place to use a sword — he would be at a disadvantage here fighting with that damned ghost.

Gone... Myca was *gone! Everything* was gone! And no way to get any of it back! In little more that twenty-four hours he had lost it all — first T-bird's crew, then all his men and his stronghold, then Grange... and finally, the one person who had made it all possible. For twenty-five years she had been his mirror, his other self, his lover... his secret weapon. But now, he had nothing left... nothing except this brat.

Nothing except revenge.

With a guttural snarl, he snatched her up and ran up another flight to where a boarded-up opening let out onto the long, leaded roof of the nave. He kicked through the boards and stepped out onto the narrow, two-foot wide flat peak of the roof and walked calmly to the far end, not bothered at all by the

heavy rain that pounded him and made the footing slippery, nor by the fact that they were far higher than even his penthouse, with nothing but a steeply pitched roof on either side, and a sheer drop-off beyond.

There was little room to manoeuvre up here, but there would be room enough for one man and one ghost... and vengeance!

Sarah was almost paralysed with fear — of Top Dollar, of the height, of the fight that she knew was to come. Squirming in his pitiless grip, she cried out hopelessly for Eric.

"D'ya think you can fly as good as my sister, little girl?" Top Dollar whispered malevolently, as Eric climbed through the opening and walked through the rain towards them. Sarah wasted no energy to answer him, blinking tears and raindrops off of her lashes as she looked at Eric with a desperate longing — she knew Top Dollar meant to throw her off of this roof before Eric's horrified eyes, and she'd never see him again in life. It was almost more than she could bear.

"*Let her go!*" Eric commanded harshly, his voice deep and resonant against the thunder of the lashing storm. But the other man made no response. "You can have me. I won't fight you," he offered, meaning every word of it: Top Dollar couldn't really kill him after all, and the sight of Sarah, so pale and frightened in that animal's grasp sickened him past endurance.

But Top Dollar didn't want an easy surrender. For all that he stood so calmly facing his Nemesis, he was filled with a homicidal fury — this man or ghost or whatever he was, had killed his sister and destroyed everything he'd spent his lifetime building. No! Eric Draven would fight... and he would die the final Death. But first, he too was going to lose that which he loved the most.

"Alright," Top Dollar whispered, even as he took his supporting hands away from Sarah and shoved her almost casually off of the narrow ledge. She staggered, then threw herself flat against the roof as she began to slide uncontrollably down its steep, slick surface.

"NO!" Eric yelled in anguish, reaching uselessly for her as she slid out of his reach, but Top Dollar kicked him viciously in the stomach and he doubled over in agony, staggering back away from her. Then, in one graceful, lethal movement, Top Dollar

drew his sword and swept it at Eric with a gloating sneer of absolute mastery.

Eric recoiled from the deadly slash, falling back, then turned the fall into a backward roll, bleeding from the deep gash across his belly where the blade had caught him. He was injured and unarmed, defenceless against the trained swordsman attacking him with such ferocity, on his back and helpless, while Sarah...

But she wasn't out of the picture yet.

When Top Dollar dropped her, she splayed her arms and legs, fingers, face — everything she could use to stop her slide over the edge and onto the ground so far below. And then she found what she'd been so desperately searching for — her fingers discovered an irregularity in the leading and curled over it with frantic strength.

For a few sickening seconds she was afraid the leading wouldn't hold her weight, then she was afraid that her *hands* wouldn't hold her weight... then she forgot to be afraid for herself at all, as she strained to look up and saw that Eric was on his back before Top Dollar.

Eric writhed away from another slash and tangled Top Dollar's feet with his own, taking Top Dollar down too. Sarah hoped Top Dollar would fall all the way, but he was too agile to be caught like that — he grabbed the edge of the narrow ridgetop and broke his fall even as Eric was struggling to his feet.

Then Eric turned, taking advantage of Top Dollar's slip for a split second to follow one of the crow's fleeting instructions, and he grabbed the iron finial cross that adorned the end of the building. It was the right size for a sword, but it was firmly attached to its mounting... and it was a lightning rod.

Even as he wrapped his hands around the cross to pull it free, a bolt of lightning struck, and his scream of agony was louder than the thunder which followed. It took all of the strength that the crow could muster just to keep Eric on his feet.

It wasn't going to be enough, Eric realised — he needed more than the crow could give him. They were both too battered and worn, and Top Dollar was fresh and strong... they couldn't stop him. He was going to finish Eric off in spite of everything they could do, and then he would take Sarah again and make her *really* pay for Myca's death.

She was dead. They were *all* dead, even Albrecht was doomed. Even with the cross to block the worst of the blows, he couldn't hold his opponent off — he didn't have the skill or the years of practice that Top Dollar was using so devastatingly against him, and his strength was failing, even with the crow's help. Soon, the next blow, or the one after that was going to leave him vulnerable to a killing stroke, and that would be the end.

He felt desperate and crippled compared to Top Dollar's lithe strength. Every step that he took away from that razor-sharp sword took him one step closer to the end of the nave, with its sheer drop down to the broad entryway steps, until finally he was forced to bend backwards against the waist-high finial block, nearly helpless against Top Dollar's greater skill. Little good the crow could do him if he fell all that way, and little more could it do if Top Dollar cut him to pieces with that terrible blade.

Sarah couldn't take her eyes off of them, even as she twisted helplessly, clinging to her precarious hand-hold. Years of swinging on the monkey bars at school had built up tough calluses on her palms — and now she needed every one of them! Then her scrambling feet broke through something and a portion of the roof fell away under her legs. She half-fell through the hole, digging her stomach painfully into its edge, and putting even more strain on her fingers. She wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer.

Far, far below her, she heard the bits of broken roof finally hit the ground... how soon before she followed them?

Above her, oblivious to her plight, the two men fought on.

Then, in the violence of their struggle, just as it seemed Top Dollar had overcome Eric, they both stumbled on the narrow, slippery ridgetop, and fell again, switching positions once more, giving Eric a little more room to manoeuvre; but by now it hardly mattered who was where — Eric could barely defend himself against Top Dollar's pitiless advance. Top Dollar laughed triumphantly, beating him down with every blow, toying with him, prolonging his agony with sadistic delight.

Finally he grew tired of the game, and with one skilful movement hooked the cross out of Eric's hands, leaving him at his mercy. Eric skidded backwards away from that lethal blade and fell again as Top Dollar closed in for the kill. In a last desperate movement, he lashed out with his feet, catching Top Dollar in

the belly and driving him back for a few precious seconds. And at last, luck favoured him — Top Dollar's sword flew out of his hand and vanished into the rain-shadowed night.

But Top Dollar didn't care, he *knew* that he was the master here, *knew* that Eric could not stand for long against him. With a maniacal burst of laughter, he threw himself at his weakened foe, knocking them both off of the narrow ridgetop to slide, as Sarah had done, down the leaded roof. For one horrible moment she thought they both were going over the edge, but at the last second they were stopped by one of the decorative pillars, stunning both of them for a moment.

Then Eric saw her.

"Sarah," he cried hoarsely, reaching helplessly for her, turning his back for one fatal instant on Top Dollar.

"Look out!" she cried uselessly, but she was too late in any case. He *always* had more than one weapon, more than one blade, and standing now, Top Dollar drew his second sword, smaller than the first, but large enough to finish the game. Then, with the full strength of all his weight, he drove it *entirely through Eric's body!*

She watched in an agony as great as his own as Eric arched against that terrible blow, the bloodied end of the blade projecting a foot and more from his chest, torment in every line of his body.

"Oh dear God," his lips shaped the words, but his lungs were too paralysed to give him breath enough to do more than gasp — a gasp that sounded more like a death rattle than anything else. Then, as Top Dollar triumphantly drew the gruesome blade out of Eric's body with a hideous, wet sound, he slumped against the pillar, turning to face his foe one last time, sliding his back down the rough stone until he sat braced against it, trying futilely to draw air into his bleeding lungs.

Sarah turned her face away, weeping for his suffering. *He's dead, and now Top Dollar will take me again... or maybe he won't. Oh God, let me die here with Eric!* But still she clung to the roof, her body refusing to surrender to the despair that clouded her mind.

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th'ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition...

— John Milton

That first volley of bullets in the boardroom had hurt Eric worse, and a dozen times in the battle that followed the crow had repaired more damage than this one sword thrust had caused, but no longer — they were both too wounded by what they had been through, and by the terrible price to be paid for helping the living. Eric could barely hold himself upright before Top Dollar, and the crow was scarcely half-healed itself, struggling to do what it could for Eric.

It wasn't going to be enough. He needed more — more strength, more healing, more *time*!... And then Top Dollar, with overweening arrogance, gave them all three.

"You know, my daddy used to say — every man's got a devil, and you can't rest 'til you find him," he said, almost conversationally, as he squatted down in front of Eric's slack body. And for the first time since the fight began, Eric allowed himself to hope, while he listened to Top Dollar gloat, giving the crow time to repair his ravaged body.

"What happened back there with you and your girlfriend... I cleared that building. Hell, nothing in this town happens without my say-so. So I'm sorry if I spoiled your wedding plans there, friend. If it's any consolation to you, you have put a smile on my face." He paused then, showing that evil smile to Eric who stared fixedly at him, not even comprehending the mocking words.

Then Top Dollar pulled out one of Myca's favourite knives and Eric blinked, sensing all the suffering engrailed upon its razor edge.

[Do not fear that toy, warrior. You have a greater weapon.]

Yes... I understand.

Top Dollar held the wicked little knife before Eric and grinned in anticipation of the blood-letting to come. "You got a lot of

spirit, son. I am gonna miss *you*." Then he slanted a quick glance at Sarah and continued, "Course, I still got her now, don't I?" And the promise in his eyes almost made her let go of her hold on the roof.

But before Top Dollar could move against him, Eric spoke, "I have something to give you." Bright blood bubbled on his lips and his face twisted with the effort it cost him to go on, "I don't *want* it anymore." Top Dollar stared sceptically at him, not afraid of anything he could do at this point. He barely flinched away when, with a convulsive movement, Eric reached out with one bloody hand and grabbed his head.

And then it was too late for him!

"*Thirty hours of pain!*" Eric gasped, as the memories he'd taken from Albrecht swarmed into Top Dollar's mind. He reached with his other hand, storming Top Dollar's consciousness, forcing him into the fiery corner of hell that he had created for Shelly. "All at once! All for you!"

For too many years Top Dollar had sown the wind that had scoured the city. Now at last the time had come for him to reap the whirlwind of his own evil.

The knife fell from his nerveless hand, and slowly he toppled backwards after it. And down through that rain-laden night he fell, in gravity-burdened flight, his eyes vacant and insane long before his limp body impaled itself — heart and head — upon the horns of a stone gargoyle below. And for many minutes afterward, the rainspout that was the monster's mouth ran with the blood of another monster.

Sarah had heard Top Dollar's voice but closed her ears to what he was saying — she couldn't bear to hear him taunt Eric as he died. But when she heard his hoarse cries, she turned back in time to see him fall to such a gruesome death that she wanted to throw up. She almost couldn't believe that he was dead. He'd been responsible for the worst unhappiness she'd ever known, and in the past few minutes he had nearly destroyed her, along with the last of everything she loved.

And he may yet have succeeded, she realised. She was too exhausted to help herself, all her strength and will spent. And Eric... Eric was gone, dead from a sword stuck all the way through him. Painfully she lifted her eyes to him, but all she could see was part of his shoulder where he sat, still slumped

against the pillar just a few paces beyond her; then she felt herself slip a couple of inches as the edge of the roof under her stomach started to give way under her weight.

Suddenly it did give way and she swung down into darkness, her full weight falling onto her abused hands. "*Eric!*" she shrieked in panic, even though she knew it was useless, as the falling roof-pieces clattered into the vast emptiness below her. She couldn't hold on any longer... and Eric couldn't help her — he was dead... and in another few seconds she was going to be dead too. She only hoped she could find him wherever they were going.

"Eric!" she whimpered again, feeling her fingers slipping, *I don't want to die!*

"Sarah!" An exhausted voice over her head drew her eyes upward and she gasped in disbelief. *It was Eric!* And he was *alive*... or whatever.

With a move that would have been slow even before he'd died, he reached and managed to get an arm around her and she fought her panic long enough to let go with one hand and take his other arm in a death grip. Finally he pulled her up to him and they both tottered for a heart-stopping moment on the brink, then he dragged her back to the relative safety of the pillar and wrapped her in a hug that promised to protect her from hell and all its devils — which, in a way, he'd already done.

She was weeping as he held her — from reaction to the last fifteen minutes, and because she knew he was going to leave her forever within the *next* fifteen minutes.

"Thank you, thank you," she gasped breathlessly, over and over; but those two little words couldn't begin to hold everything she wanted to put into them, and she finally subsided into watery hiccups.

"C'mon," he muttered wearily, gently hauling her to her feet. "Let's get you out of this rain before you catch your death," and he smiled almost teasingly at her.

Then he had no more breath to spare as they made their way along the ledge back to the centre of the building, up the ladder-like steps along the roof to the opening into the bell tower.

It was a slow and painful journey for both of them down the many stairs, and Sarah found that she had to support Eric or he never

would've made it, but finally they reached the bottom floor where Albrecht had dragged himself.

"Go help him," Eric told her, as they drew close to the wounded policeman, and even though Sarah had the feeling Eric needed just as much help — if not more — she hurried down the stairs to her only other friend in the world. His dark skin looked grey and he didn't move when they arrived except to quirk the corners of his mouth upward in a travesty of a smile.

"Are you alive?" Sarah asked, not entirely facetiously — after all, she was already in the company of one ghost... for all she knew, Albrecht could be another.

"Ah, God," he gasped, proving that he was still among the living, then fumbled in his pocket. "I need a cigarette." He fished out a pack and passed it over to Eric who had slumped down across from him with a sigh of pain. Sarah looked sadly at him, God, they were *all* walking-wounded, and Albrecht shouldn't be smoking, especially not now. But she wasn't going to deny him whatever comfort he could get, not after he'd risked his life to save hers.

Eric absently took out a cigarette, "You helped me," he said quietly, tapping his head. "What you kept in here saved me." His eyes echoed the pain of those shared memories, and his voice trembled when he remembered the last few desperate minutes on the roof. "Thanks," he said softly, knowing how inadequate the word was.

"Don't mention it," Albrecht said, and meant it — after all, he was a cop: "serving and protecting" were part of the job description. He watched longingly as Eric lit a cigarette for him. "I've been meaning to come to church anyway," he said, making light of the whole thing, and gratefully took the cigarette Eric held up for him.

But his pleasure was short-lived as the acrid smoke burned into his injured lung. "Oh yuck!" With a grimace of disgust he spat it out and looked ruefully at them. "I'm quitting as of now... if I live."

Eric laughed then, almost a real laugh, and Sarah's heart nearly broke at the sight, then he stood up... and it did break. He was going to leave.

"No!" she whispered involuntarily, and he looked forlornly at her, his eyes mirroring her own misery. But this time, there was nothing he could do to help her.

In the distance they could hear approaching sirens and Eric turned his face towards the sound. "Backup," Albrecht confirmed sarcastically. "Took 'em long enough."

"Stay with him until help comes," Eric told her, knowing he couldn't stay any longer.

"He'll be okay, right?" she asked worriedly, looking across at her wounded friend, but when there was no answer she darted her eyes to where Eric had been standing.

He was gone!

"Eric?" she yelped in dismay. Gone again... without saying goodbye. She couldn't take any more of this!

"Unh, he does that a lot," Albrecht grunted sympathetically, his heart going out to her. But he had other things to take care of.

"Quick, Sarah," he said then, startling her. "We gotta work out a story — Eric wasn't here, okay. It was all Top Dollar. He went crazy, killed T-bird and everybody else, even Grange and the woman, then jumped off the roof. I came here like I said — to pay my respects to Eric and Shelly — and found him, we fought and he thought he killed me, then he jumped. You came by after it was all over. Can you remember that?"

It was hard to follow his panting words when her mind was half-paralysed with grief, but finally the sense of what he wanted began to register.

"Uh, I guess so," she said uncertainly, hoping the story would be good enough to protect Eric... although, once he was back with Shelly, he wouldn't *need* any protection.

Suddenly they heard voices in the nave and Sarah called out as loud as she could, "Over here! Uh, 'Officer down!' Is that what you say?" she asked Albrecht in a quieter voice.

He nodded at her, then smiled ruefully, "Looks like I'm going to live after all."

"Yeah, and you promised to quit smoking if you did. I have a witness... even if he *is* a ghost.

"Don't worry, Sarah. I keep my promises." He smiled wearily at her as the first of the cops found them.

The paramedics had arrived on the heels of the police cars and it took them no time at all to bundle her friend up and haul him on a gurney out into the night.

It hurt to remember that other night, exactly a year ago, when she'd followed another friend on another gurney, but this wasn't like that: Albrecht was going to be all right — the paramedics had promised her and she could tell they weren't just shining her on.

He looked up into the cloudy sky above and smiled at her, "At least it stopped raining," he said, trying to make her feel better.

"It can't rain *all* the time," she quoted, torn between love and loss, then she frowned as a well-remembered voice blasted them with its anger.

"No, I don't believe it! This nightmare your fault, Albrecht?" it said, callously holding up the paramedics from moving him further. It was the bad-tempered cop from that night last year and she glared balefully at him. What a rotten thing to say to someone who was hurt... who'd just saved her life!

"You go on home," Albrecht said to her in a low voice, and she was only too ready to obey him — she didn't want to stay around that foul-mouthed jerk any longer than she had to. Quickly she slipped away... still, she didn't like the idea of abandoning her friend to him.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" the jerk growled, and Sarah wished she was grown up and a man so she could sock him in the face. She peeked around the side of the ambulance.

Albrecht wasn't intimidated by the detective, not after what he'd been through in the last twenty-four hours. "Your vigilante's up on the roof," he gloated with grim amusement, grabbing Torres by the lapel and dragging him down to within inches of his face. "You *missed* it!" he grunted with satisfaction.

Good for you! Sarah cheered, as the jerk barked at the paramedics.

"Get him outta here," he blustered, freeing himself from Albrecht's grip with a shudder of disgust, then watched the paramedics load him into the ambulance with an uncomfortable expression on his ugly face. He was obviously unhappy about what he'd found here.

Stupid asshole, Sarah grumbled as she walked out into the street. *They would've had him out of here ages ago if you hadn't of stopped them.* Then she remembered her skateboard, and — more importantly — her suitcase of photographs. She turned back to the cemetery to get them... and stopped cold. *That's where Eric was going*, she thought, starting to tremble. Would he still be there? Suddenly it was the most important thing in the world that she see him again. Not to talk to, or touch, or hug... just to *see* him one more time.

> There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.
>
> **— Thornton Wilder**

She hurried into the graveyard, afraid she would be too late. Then she saw him, huddled by Shelly's grave, forlorn and shivering, finally at the end of his supernatural strength... at the end of *any* kind of strength. She knew she couldn't... she mustn't... go to him, but he looked so pitiful lying there that she couldn't even bear to look. Next to him was the gaping hole of his own grave, and she didn't want to look at that either, thinking how horrible it must have been for him when he first struggled out of it.

Then, turning her eyes away, she saw a ghostly figure approaching and her heart skipped a beat when she recognised who it was. It was Shelly! Shelly — whole and beautiful again, no pain, no fear, no injuries; able at last to reach out to Eric and find him once more, with no one to stand between them.

Sarah had never realised how poisoned her memory of Shelly had been by that last image of her, bloody and suffering on the gurney outside her shattered home. For all this past year the

Shelly she had loved had been lost to her as surely as she had been lost to Eric. Now, for the first time in twelve unending months, she was back... for both of them.

Shelly paused and looked through the concealing shadows at Sarah and smiled lovingly at her. *You never really lost us. And you never will.*

She could hear Shelly's thoughts!... thoughts like a warm caress. Sarah sagged to the ground, overcome by grief and joy combined as she watched Shelly go to Eric and reach a gentle hand to cup his face, while he looked up at her in a daze. Her lips quirked in sympathy at his sad state, then she bent down to kiss him, healing him with her boundless love.

For a long time they kissed, while in the street beyond sirens wailed and lights flashed, but in their little corner of the world, all was still. Slowly Shelly drew Eric to his feet, until he stood, tall and strong again at her side.

Then, for what Sarah knew was the really last time, they turned to her. Eric lifted Shelly's hand to his lips and kissed it lovingly, then held their joined hands out to Sarah, passing the kiss through the air to her with a little salute. With trembling fingers, she returned it to them, then was blinded by tears and buried her head in her arms, grief for herself overpowering her joy for them.

When she was finally able to look up again, they were gone, as she'd known they'd be. And something else was gone too! It took her a few moments to figure out what it was, since everything looked perfectly ordinary. But that was what was so strange — it hadn't *been* ordinary a few minutes ago: but now Eric's grave was filled in and looked just as it had for the past year.

He's really gone, she thought miserably as she walked slowly over to the two quiet graves. *And I'm all alone again.*

Then the crow flew down to land on Eric's stone, holding something in his beak for her. She reached out her hand and he dropped a familiar gold circlet into her palm — somehow he'd found it after it had been taken from her. And as she curled her fingers protectively around it, she remembered Shelly's words: *You never really lost us. And you never will.*

But it's not the same as having you here, she thought wearily, *And I don't know what to do now.* Everybody was dead — Eric and

Shelly, T-bird, Tin Tin, Funboy and Skank, Top Dollar, Myca and Grange. She felt like the last survivor of a war — which in a way, she was — or even, the last person left alive in the world.

Too much blood. Too much death.

And what was she going to do now. Go home? Hah! That was a joke. *Maybe I'll just curl up on Eric's grave and go to sleep and not ever bother to wake up*, she sighed, her thoughts turning to death with terrifying ease.

No, I can't do that... not after what Shelly said. But I'm all alone, and I don't know what to do.

She found her skateboard and the little suitcase and slowly walked out into the empty night... and her emptier future.

> This old anvil laughs at many broken hammers.
> There are men who can't be bought.
>
> **— Carl Sandburg**

It had been one helluva night, Captain Lehman thought staring at the mounds of paperwork on his desk, and the night wasn't even half over yet. Shit, it had been a helluva twenty-four hours: Twenty-six of the city's worst criminals violently murdered by their by their own leader; that leader dead by his own hand; and not a single arson fire.

All that was on the plus side. On the minus side — one of his best officers was in the hospital... but the doctors had assured him that Albrecht was going to be just fine. The Captain smiled with grim satisfaction — Albrecht was a hero after that business at the old cathedral, and Torres was shitting a brick trying to put a good face on his jealousy. In fact, Torres had been on tilt ever since they'd gotten the call for the first homicide

the night before — as if he was taking the whole thing personally... and maybe he was.

Just then, two men walked into his office and quietly shut the door behind them. He looked up at them in irritation, then went very still, all the paperwork on his desk forgotten. He knew them, they were I.A. — Internal Affairs — and their presence here could only mean trouble. Wordlessly one of them dropped a folder in front of him, and with some trepidation, he opened it and began reading.

"Where did you *get* this?" he asked in astonishment after scanning the folder's contents for a few hurried minutes.

"From the Trash Club. Seems Top Dollar left in a little bit of a hurry. Not that he's in any position to care anymore," the other added with a certain smugness.

"Torres! Damn! *That's* why he kept leaning on Albrecht all this time. I never did trust him." Damned if he wasn't going to see about reinstatement for Albrecht after the dust settled. The captain shook his head, angry for having nursed a viper to his bosom for so long. "You take him into custody yet?"

"Yeah, he's downtown now. We had to move fast before he got wind of this evidence. Keep a lid on this for now — Torres ain't the only one on Top Dollar's payroll that we got evidence for."

"Busy night for the Prosecutor's Office."

"Yeah," said the I.A. man with a wolfish grin, and the Captain grinned back.

Like he said — one helluva night!

O gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,
Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men
Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart
Dare the unpastured dragon in his den

— Percy Bysshe Shelley

The streets were quiet and there wasn't a fire to be seen as Sarah slowly skated her way back to the apartment. There weren't even that many people out — they were probably all huddled indoors, watching and listening for the fires to start. She almost wished she could tell them that they didn't have to worry about it tonight — the boss fire-starter was dead, splattered all over a stone statue, his insides hanging out in the rain.

She skidded to a stop by a telephone pole, clinging desperately to it as she fought off another wave of nausea. She'd been okay until she'd left the cemetery and started skating, then it had hit her — everything that had happened... since the night before, really. She'd thrown up into the gutter three times already, and now there was nothing left in her stomach.She was all alone, and sick. There was nobody left. Darla, Albrecht, Shelly, Eric — all gone. Well, Albrecht wasn't really gone, just in the hospital... and at least Eric was with Shelly now, she had to keep telling herself that. He was happy. He was at peace.

He was *gone!*

By now, she wasn't even sure she was going to be able to get home, she felt so awful. She kept seeing Top Dollar, spiked on that horrible statue, bloody stone horns sticking right through him, and Myca with her face all ripped apart and ruined, and Grange practically floating in his own blood. And Albrecht trying to pretend he was okay and doing a lousy job of it. And older memories — Shelly, writhing in pain, gasping Eric's name, and Eric, hidden under a blood-soaked sheet. Even tonight there'd been blood all over him — it had come off on her jacket when he'd hugged her, and when they'd helped each other down the stairs.

Too much blood. Too much death. And she was all alone, with waking nightmares chasing her down the empty streets. She was shrivelling up inside from loneliness and fear and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. She couldn't stop the corrosive memories — the way Top Dollar had touched her, the deadly promise in Myca's eyes, Grange's implacable hands... and it didn't help a bit to know that they were dead now and couldn't hurt her.

But they *had* hurt her, she realised shakily. Somehow they'd wounded her so badly she knew she would never get well again. They'd wanted to kill her... and worse. And they'd nearly done it too. If it hadn't been for Eric... if he hadn't come, would they have left, taking her with them? Of course they would've. And if Top Dollar had finished off Eric on the roof, he would've pulled her up and taken her then too, she'd seen it in his eyes. And what Skank had tried would have been nothing compared to what *they* would've done to her.

It was too horrible to think about, but she couldn't stop thinking about it. She'd heard that sometimes, when a mouse is lucky enough to escape from a cat, it dies anyway, from shock, or heart failure — just plain scared to death.

She felt like that mouse.

Finally she reached her apartment building and began calling for Gabriel. She hoped he hadn't been out hunting for mice — she had too much sympathy for them by now — and she hoped he wasn't trying to find his way back to the loft — it was too far for him, and besides, she didn't want to go back there again, not without Eric. Then, just as she was about to give up hope and add Gabriel to her list of deserters, she heard a welcoming meow, and saw his fluffy white tail bobbing above a pile of debris.

Climbing the stairs with her three most precious possessions, she wondered why she was even bothering going "home"... except that she desperately needed a place to sleep for a while. She hoped Darla wouldn't be there — she didn't think she could handle seeing her mother drugged up again, not after the way the morning had begun. Too many promises broken.

Too much blood. Too much death.

There was light coming from under the door — either Darla was back, or else she'd left the light on. She hoped it was the

latter. Her hands were shaking so much that she could barely fit her key into the lock, and Gabriel started to squirm in her arms, complaining about her clumsiness. Suddenly all she wanted to do was lean her head against the wall and cry. She couldn't even see the lock clearly anymore, as tears began blurring her eyes.

This was it. She couldn't take any more. She was just going to collapse right here in the hallway and to hell with everything. Nothing mattered anymore anyway, she thought numbly, as she leaned against the unyielding door, her knees starting to buckle.

Suddenly the door swung open and she nearly fell into the apartment, Gabriel leaping out of her arms with an indignant yowl. But before she could hit the floor someone grabbed her and held her steady, hugging her tightly and crying all over her.

It was Darla.

"Oh, Sarah, Sarah. Where have you been? I've been so worried. Omigod, you're bleeding! What's happened to you?" Her mother was almost hysterical as she knelt on the floor, holding her daughter in a desperate embrace.

"You... you came back. You're not... *on* anything," Sarah gasped uncertainly, finding it hard to shift mental gears. She'd been so convinced that her mother had abandoned her again.

"No, no. I told you, that's all over now, because of *him*. Where're you hurt?" she asked, feverishly searching for the source of the blood, then gasped when she saw Sarah's hands and wrists.

"Don't worry, Mom, it's not my blood — it's Eric's. Oh, yeah, my hands — that's nothing. You should see the other guy," and she started to laugh at the image her sick joke conjured up, and somehow she couldn't stop laughing. Except, she wasn't laughing any more, she was crying — crying as if her heart was going to break.

Only, it already had.

She cried for everything she'd lost, everything she wanted and couldn't have, for everything that had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours... and the last twelve months... and the last eleven years. She cried because she was just a kid and

she'd been crushed in the grown-ups' games, and because she'd thought she was all alone. But she wasn't alone anymore... she had her mother back.

Finally, the tears were all gone. It had taken hours; her mother had stripped her wet clothes off and dressed her in warm pyjamas, cleaned and bandaged her raw wrists and blistered palms, fed her and hugged her and soothed her just like she was a little baby again. And finally she'd listened, torn by horror and outrage, while Sarah told her everything that had happened that night.

"I know it sounds crazy, Mom," she said, when she told about the fight on the roof, "but I'm not making any of it up."

But her mother was too shocked by the threat to her daughter to waste any time disbelieving any of the fantastic elements of the story. "I'm not making *this* up either," she said, pulling back her sleeves and showing Sarah her unblemished arms, which only the night before had been scarred with ugly needle tracks. For a moment they stared wordlessly at each other, sharing a miraculous secret. Then Sarah went on with her story.

It was terribly hard, reliving all of that for her mother, but a feeling of relief grew with every word she spoke, and soon she found herself telling her mom a lot of other stuff that she'd never told her before — how she'd made friends with Shelly more than two years earlier, and how wonderful it had been when Shelly had met Eric and fallen in love with him, and what good friends the three of them had become. And how she'd gone to Shelly's apartment a year ago this very night, and what she'd found there. And how she'd mourned them and missed them all year long, until she'd seen him the night before. And how she'd gone looking for him that afternoon, and found him in Shelly's old loft.

"They're together now, Mom. I saw them. They went off with each other... and left me all alone," she sighed, choking up again at the memory.

"Not *all* alone. You still have me, remember? I'm so sorry I wasn't here when you got home, but the buses were running late because of Devil's Night. And because I wasn't here, that monster nearly *killed* you. Thank God for Eric!... ghost or whatever he was. He saved your life twice."

"Three times, Mom," she smiled into her mother's startled face, reaching out to touch the inside of her arm, where the needle tracks had been. "He brought *you* back to me."

Later that night — a peaceful, arson-less night — Darla kept quiet vigil by her sleeping daughter's bed, watching her like the precious jewel she had finally realised she was. The big cat, Gabriel, purred contentedly in her lap as she absently stroked him, and the television droned quietly in the corner of the room. Occasionally she would look up and pay close attention to what the newscasters were saying, curious to learn the "official version" of the night's events.

The incident at the old cathedral was reported much as Sarah had described, with the omission of any mention of a ghost in whiteface... or of Sarah. Her friend Albrecht was going to be okay, according to the reports, and she was looking forward to telling Sarah that as soon as she woke up. They'd go see him in the hospital, Sarah would like that... and they needed to talk to him about just where Sarah fit into the "official" story.

Of course, it would be great if they could all just pretend she'd never been there, that nothing had happened to her. But she *had* been there, and terrible things had happened to her. Sarah's hysterics had frightened Darla, and she knew Sarah was going to need counselling after her experiences. Her heart nearly stopped every time she thought about the terrible danger Sarah had been in, how close she'd come to being raped and killed. And not just tonight, but last night as well, and even a year ago: if she'd gotten to her friend's apartment just a few minutes earlier... God! She couldn't bear to think about it — it had all been her fault!

How many other nights had she been in danger, out there alone, on the streets, like *he'd* said — Sarah's strange magical Eric. How many times had Sarah had to fight for her life because her mother had failed her? *"Mother is the name for God on the lips and hearts of all children."* So what did that make her? A devil? Or just incredibly stupid? Hell, she probably needed some counselling of her own, so she'd never turn to drugs and jerks like Funboy ever again.

At least she'd gotten the new job — that would help: more money, a decent place to work, a chance for promotion. It was a real miracle... but this had been a day for miracles, the greatest of which was sleeping in the bed right next to her.

Yes, Eric, I do understand. Finally.

The news was on again. Darla turned her attention to the television. A commentator was editorialising.

"...With the death of over two dozen of its worst criminals in a bizarre murder/suicide spree, this city has been given a challenge to start over, to live free and in peace. I say 'challenge' rather than 'opportunity' because it *will* be a challenge! It would be all too easy for each of us to shrug our shoulders and turn our backs on what has happened here tonight, saying we don't want to 'get involved'. But we *are* involved! This is *our* future we hold in our hands. Are we going to give it back to the criminals, or will we take a stand against them?

"They've been struck a heavy blow tonight, but it wasn't a mortal blow. That will be up to us. I know I'm just one man, in a city of many thousands, but I vow to you that I *will* fight. I'll find out what one man can do to make this city clean and safe, and then I'll *do* it. And I'll tell the rest of you so you can join me. Together we can take back our city... and our future... one man and one woman at a time.

"We're all in this together... it's all in our hands."

Thoughtfully, Darla reached over and turned the television off as the news program ended, "Amen," she whispered, caressing her daughter's sleeping face with gentle hands. "And thank you, Eric. Thank you for everything."

Love is Forever

If the people we love are stolen from us, the way to have them live on is to never stop loving them. Buildings burn, people die... but real love is forever.

— Sarah's Journal

Seven years later.

> See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds,
> With Joy and Love triumphing.
>
> **— John Milton**

Fred was putting the finishing touches on a birthday bouquet, when *she* walked into the shop and he nearly dropped the baby's-breath all over the floor. Quickly getting a hold of himself he hurried over to the vision of blond loveliness that lit up the florist shop, outshining every flower in it (to his eyes at least) and gave her a smile that burned with all the ardour of his unrequited love.

"Hey, Sarah. This isn't your usual day. Special order this time?" he asked a little breathlessly.

"No, Fred, same as always. I'll be too busy tomorrow," she said with her sad, beautiful smile. He'd give anything if he could be the one to make her smile with joy.

"Oh yeah, you're leaving for college tomorrow. I'm gonna miss you," he sighed, disgusted by the inadequacy of the words and the clumsy way he said them. Then his spirits sank even more when Les, his boss, came out of the back room. He had the horrible suspicion that Les thought his feelings for Sarah were something to laugh about, although he'd never laughed at him... yet.

"Hi, Les," she said, her face lighting up for her *old* friend, damn him.

"So, tomorrow's the big day. Sarah-Monster's going to be a college woman now. Hard to believe, kiddo." Les's ugly face looked about ready to split with pride, as if he'd been personally responsible for her success.

"Gonna try anyway," she laughed. It sounded like bells. "Did you hear? Mom got the promotion! Assistant Food Services Manager."

"Good for her. Next thing you know she'll be running the whole company."

"I dunno," chimed a voice from the back room, "food service is a tough business." Mickey stuck his head through the doorway, as gloomy as ever.

"Hear the hotdog king," Les derided fondly. "You'd better stick to the roses!"

"Don't laugh!" Sarah protested. "She's talking about going for an MBA after I get out of college. She'll do it too, if I know my mom." She smiled proudly at the thought. "Oh yeah, Mrs. Albrecht has been trying to get a hold of you. She wants to know if you and Mickey and Fred are coming to my party, after the Neighbourhood Watch meeting?"

"Are you kidding? She and Captain Albrecht both would have my hide if I missed either one. 'It's our future' after all... and yours too." Fred groaned again inside when Les quoted that mouldy old slogan — why did Sarah have to have her going-away party at the Watcher's meeting? All those old guys and businessmen? Just because she was friends with all of them and had been a junior member ever since it had been organised by her pal Albrecht. Dammit, she should be having a party with nothing but kids her own age... like himself.

"Here's your flowers," he said a little sullenly, handing her the carefully wrapped package. "See you tonight."

"Thanks, Fred. Bye, Les, bye, Mickey. See you tonight," she said in her lovely voice, then she was gone in a cloud of sunlit gold.

"Back to work, Fred," Les told his lovestruck assistant sternly, as he stared after Sarah with dazzled eyes. He could sympathise

with the boy — Sarah had grown up into a remarkably good-looking young woman since the days when he'd given her root-beers on the house at The Pit.

Of course, they'd all changed since those days — Albrecht, the former beat cop, had made Captain a few years ago; Darla, the former... well that was best left forgotten... had worked her way up through the ranks in the hotel restaurant business; and he himself, former bartender in a sleazy dive, had gone into partnership with Sarah's buddy, Mickey, and bought a failing florist shop and turned it into a thriving business.

But then, the whole neighbourhood was thriving these days, ever since Top Dollar had rid it of the scum that were destroying it... and then so considerately had removed himself, having failed to kill Sarah and Albrecht, thank God. Yes, this was the future they'd taken back, "one man and one woman at a time", and he and Mickey and Darla and Sarah were the living proof of that.

Poor Fred — he didn't understand any of it. All he saw was Sarah and his hormones went into overdrive. He was a nice kid, but he didn't have a chance with Sarah — Les had watched her grow up and start dating and he knew that whatever she was looking for, she hadn't found it around here. That little lady had high standards, maybe *too* high, but he couldn't fault her for them.

And now she was off to say goodbye to the role model for those high standards of hers — poor Fred indeed. He never had a chance against her idealised memories of Eric Draven. None of her young men ever had. Maybe she'd find her "Mr. Right" at college. He hoped so anyway, for her sake — after what she'd been through, she deserved the best.

> Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.
>
> **— Rainer Maria Rilke**

The old cemetery had that burnt, end-of-summer smell to it, but it was still the smell of growing things and Sarah paused to drink it in before she made her way to Eric and Shelly's graves for her last visit until... oh, probably Thanksgiving vacation, although she thought she might try to make it back for October

thirtieth, the old "Devil's Night"... that she liked to think of as "Angel's Night", in honour of Eric and Shelly.

It was as peaceful as always in the cemetery, but not very quiet, and Sarah frowned in irritation at the workmen, busy on their scaffolding around the old cathedral. She usually came on Sunday and avoided the racket of the restoration work that had been going on all summer. Maybe they'd be done by the time she came back.

Whatever. She looked up at the cathedral roof, newly leaded and gleaming in the sunlight, as smooth as a jetliner's wing. Boy, if someone threw her down it now, she'd go sailing over the edge without a thing to catch on to. She shuddered at the thought and dropped her eyes to one of the gargoyles — the stone monster that had claimed Top Dollar as one of its own still glowered there under the eaves, dark with mildew and uglier things.

Shit! She pulled her eyes away from those haunted stones and faced back into the cemetery — *these* were the only ghosts she wanted anything to do with anymore. She hurried down the path to Eric and Shelly.

There was someone there! A stranger... or, at least, she didn't recognise him from the back. He was standing quietly in front of Eric's grave, regret in every line of his body. (A tall, slender, graceful-looking body with very cute buns, a part of her noticed)

"Hello there," she said softly, coming to a stop about a dozen feet behind him. "Friend of yours?"

He started at the unexpected sound of her voice and turned quickly to see who was behind him... but her shock was greater than his.

"*Eric?*" she gasped. *Not again?*, she thought, swaying on her feet in sudden dizziness. Then she felt a firm grasp on her arms and a steady hand leading her to a little stone bench in the shade of a Japanese maple.

"Are you all right?" She found herself blinking up into a worried face that was a younger version of Eric's, listening to a voice so like his that it gave her gooseflesh.

"Who *are* you?" she said in consternation, grabbing a tissue out of her purse and wiping her damp face. This was uncanny.

"I'm Johnny Draven, Eric's cousin. I..."

"Johnny!" Suddenly everything began making sense again. "'Eric's Shadow'! He *told* me about you, how you came to live with his folks after your mother died."

"That's right. I was only five, and my dad was stationed overseas." He looked at her with growing interest and chuckled at his memories. "'Eric's Shadow'. God, it's been a long time since anyone's called me that. I still can't believe how patient he was — after all, he was fourteen years older than me, practically a grown man. I worshiped that big cousin of mine, even after he moved out and got a place of his own. Did you know that he offered to take care of me after Uncle Art and Aunt Emilie died?"

"Yeah, he told me. He said you were like his little brother. He liked kids... Shelly always said he'd make a great father." She sighed, looking at the graves before them.

"She... she was his fiancée, wasn't she. I was in Germany with my dad when we heard about... what happened." He touched the flowers she was still carrying. "You must've known him pretty well yourself." He looked at her inquiringly, lifting his eyebrows in an expression she'd seen Eric make a thousand times.

"Yes," she whispered, as past and present, memories and reality seemed to tangle together in the hot summer air. "They sort of took me in, back when I was just a smart-mouth street brat. They straightened me out... saved my life really."

"It must've been hard on you when they were... murdered. Did they ever find out who did it?" She caught the flash of an old anger in his eyes and recognised it as a twin of her own.

"Oh yeah, they found out," she said grimly, her eyes lifting involuntarily back to that gargoyle. "They're all dead now — T-bird, Funboy, Tin Tin, Skank, Top Dollar and all the rest. Eric and Shelly were avenged, in spades!"

"So many! What happened? We never really knew — Dad was in the Air Force you know, and we had to keep hopping around the world with no chance to find out anything. But he's retired now, not too far from the State University... that's why I transferred, and that's why I'm here."

"You're going to State?" she asked, unerringly picking up on that one fact.

"Yeah. I'm a junior, in Engineering. Why? Don't tell me you're going too?" He looked at her with such a hopeful expression that her heart began to soar.

"Just starting. I'm leaving tomorrow in fact. Look, why don't you come to my going-away party tonight? One of the guests is a police captain — he was there, he knows all about what happened. He's one of my best friends, I'll ask him to tell you about it." She looked over at him hopefully. Now that she'd talked with him for a few minutes, she realised that he didn't really resemble Eric all that much... no more than you'd expect cousins to. But he certainly was good-looking in his own right, and he seemed to share Eric's great personality. Of course, he'd lived with Eric for five years — five very impressionable years.

She stood up then, giving him a warm smile, and walked solemnly over to the graves. Carefully she propped the colourful bouquet that Fred had prepared in front of Shelly's stone, and placed one perfect white rose before Eric's, then she stood and smiled at them both.

"Later," she said, in an old ritual, involuntarily scanning the trees for large black birds. But of course there weren't any. "Have you eaten? How would you like to have dinner with me and my mom, before the party? We can listen to Eric's album, if you'd like."

"That'd be great, I never had a chance to hear it. So, what's your major, do you know yet?" he asked, and after her bout of dizziness, it was only understandable that he take her arm to steady her. And it was only natural that, although she didn't feel the least bit dizzy anymore, she leaned a little into his support.

"It's mathematics, with a minor in music."

"Math and music? That's kind of a weird combination, isn't it?"

"Not really. Eric gave me music... it's about all I have left of him. And I like math... I'm good at it... and I hope you're not one of those guys who say math isn't for girls," she challenged, the playful tone not quite masking the seriousness of her question.

"Hell, no! I think it's great. Hey, I'm pretty good in math myself — maybe I can help you with your homework." He grinned at her in happy expectation and her heart took wing.

"Is that a promise?" she asked, her eyes sparkling.

"It's a promise," he smiled back at her, then jumped when something swooped down, startling both of them. "What the hell!"

"It's just a crow," she said wonderingly, staring at the big black bird that had flown down to land on Eric's stone. "He comes here... sometimes. He's, like, the night watchman."

"Well then, Night Watchman," Johnny saluted the bird, "take care of my cousin and his girlfriend, and everybody else."

"Oh, he will," Sarah said, winking at her old friend. "He's good at taking care of things."

With a friendly caw, the crow fluffed its feathers and settled back down to watch Sarah and Johnny walk together out of the cemetery and into the revitalised streets beyond; then it burbled quietly to itself, half-closing its eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it sent a quiet message rippling across the elemental planes:

[They will be happy.]

You do good work.

[Not I. You are the one to help the living.]

With your help... thank you, old friend.

With a satisfied caw, the crow took wing and vanished into the blinding light of the sunset.

> Though lovers be lost, love shall not;
> And death shall have no dominion.
>
> **— Dylan Thomas**

Author's Afterword

(Or, How This Novel Came to be Written)

The Crow, starring the late Brandon Lee, opened on May 11, 1994, but I was no fan of "chop-socky" revenge movies and paid it little attention because I was hard at work on the final chapters of "Edward and Me", a "practice" novel based on the Edward Scissorhands character from the Tim Burton movie, which I had been working on since March. My theory was, that by writing a story that could not be published because of copyright restrictions, I would be free to write and learn without worrying about pleasing an editor.

I had produced well over 115,000 words when I began noticing those evocative movie posters of Brandon Lee, and read several reviews of *The Crow* which piqued my interest. I remembered the last time I had been attracted to a character in a movie poster, and here I was, writing an enormous novel based on the imaginings *that* movie inspired.

Finally, on June 4, 1994, I gave in and went to see the movie... and my life changed completely.

I drove home in a daze, already drafting my own version of the story in my mind, replacing Sarah's streetwise character with another child, more innocent and vulnerable, taking the plotline back several years before the murders and developing a number of new characters. I went back to see it again the next day — the first of over two dozen repeat viewings that would fill my summer.

Poor "Edward and Me" — I barely wrote 3000 words over the next three days. I couldn't stop thinking about *The Crow*. Finally it occurred to me that this would make another great "practice" novel, although I had planned to wrap up "Edward and Me" in the next few weeks and start on a "real" novel — one I would submit for publication. But I had to put that project on hold for a while: resisting *The Crow* was like resisting a primal force of nature. I *had* to write!

Galvanised by that prospect, I tried to finish "Edward and Me", but gave up after 2 days and began writing on June 12, 1994. I

was soon frustrated by my inability to recall the order of events or the dialogue word for word, so I bought a microcassette recorder and recorded the movie right in the theatre, transcribing it later for reference. And I continued to go see the movie 2 and 3 times a week, studying every detail of it.

By the last week of July, I had written 100,000 words and was going strong. My story is a dark, dark fantasy full of suffering, but balanced by joy and redemption, and I deliberately let out all the stops in my descriptions, which pretty much guarantees it unsuitable for the general public. Then I began to get the urge to write exactly the movie I saw on the screen... so I did, writing both at the same time, which wasn't as hard as it sounds since there is a lot of overlap between the two stories.

On August 3, 1996, I ordered the movie book and original comic books, also some posters and trading cards, to help me in my research. Once they arrived, I studied them eagerly and began incorporating as much information from them into my novels as I could: scenes and phrases from the comic books, scenes and explanations from the original script that didn't make it into the movie.

And I read James O'Barr's books over and over, even though they left me shaking and aching inside. This, I thought, is a man who has suffered much. I pray that he finds the peace within himself that so eluded Eric.

By the end of August I was finished: 170,000 words of my own dark fantasy, "Fire in the Rain", 62,000 words of "The Crow". Except, of course, I couldn't leave them alone! There followed months of tweaking and reworking.

And all the while, I was alone. I could find no one who shared my love of this movie, no one to talk to, no one to show my book to... until April 1997 when I finally got on the Internet and, to my astonishment, found thousands of others who felt the same way I did.

So, to all of you, this is my gift.

Take care, be well, fall in love

Jeanette Barcroft
2 April 1997